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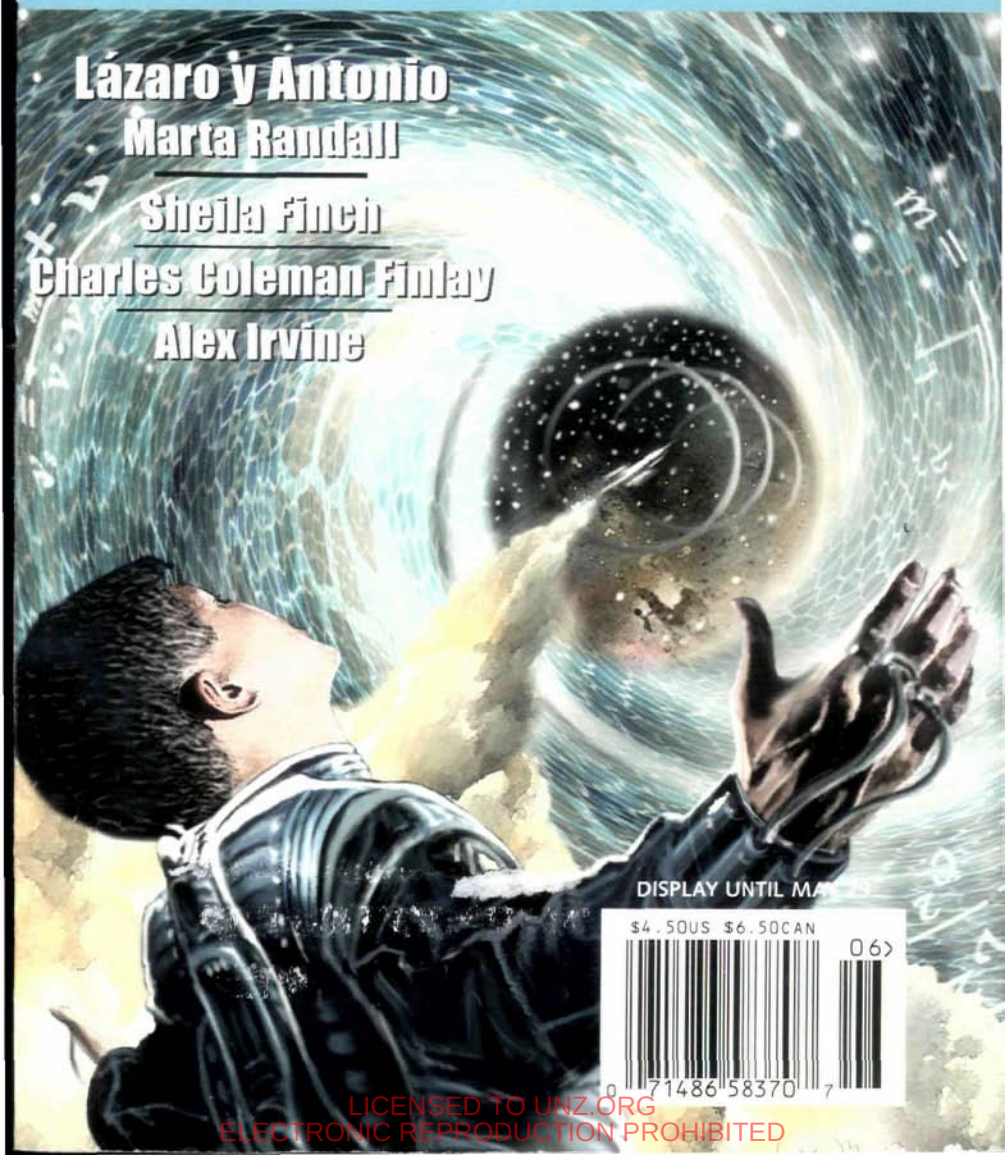

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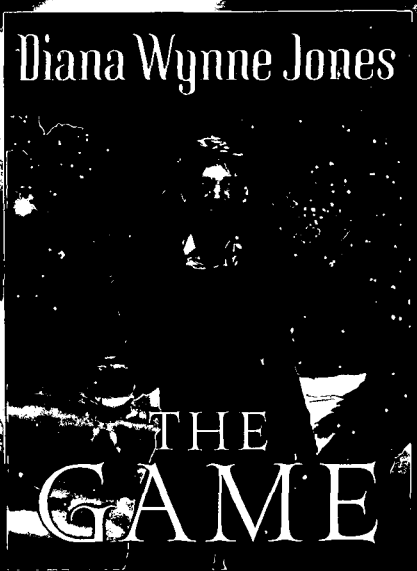

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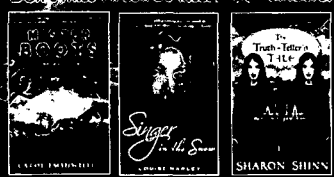
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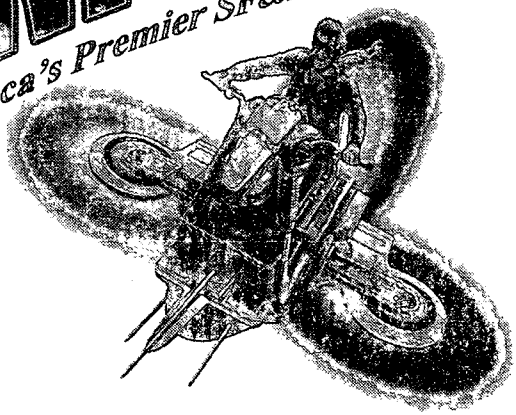

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Henghis Hapthorn didn't retire after his last appearance here (which was in "The Gist Hunter" in our June 2005 issue). Au contraire. *The foremost freelance discriminator of Old Earth's penultimate age recently made his novel debut in* Majestrum. *The limited edition version of the novel also includes a bonus short story, which we're pleased to reprint here. (By the way, a second Hapthorn novel,* The Spiral Labyrinth, *is due out in September.)*

Sweet Trap

By Matthew Hughes

"EXPENSIVE FRUIT MAY GROW on trees," I said, "but not the funds needed to purchase it in seemingly limitless quantities."

I gestured at my befurred assistant, formerly an integrator, but now transformed into a creature that combined the attributes of ape and cat. I had lately learned that it was a beast known as a grinnet, and that back in the remote ages when sympathetic association last ruled the cosmos, its kind had been employed as familiars by practitioners of magic.

My remark did not cause it to pause in the act of reaching for its third karba fruit of the morning. Its small, handlike paws deftly peeled the purple rind and its sharp incisors dug into the golden pulp. Juice dripped from its whiskers as it chewed happily.

"Nothing is more important," said the voice of my other self, speaking within the confines of our shared consciousness, "than that I encompass as much as possible of the almost forgotten lore of magic, before it regains its ascendancy over rationalism." He showed me a mental image of several thaumaturges scattered across the face of Old Earth, clad

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in figured garments, swotting away at musty tomes or chanting over bubbling alembics. "When the change finally comes, those who have prepared will command power."

"That will not be a problem for those who have neglected to earn their livings," I answered, "for they will have long since starved to death in the gutters of Olkney."

The dispute had arisen because Osk Rievor, as my intuitive inner self now preferred to be called, had objected to my accepting a discrimination that was likely to take us offworld. A voyage would interrupt what had become his constant occupation: ransacking every public connaissarium, as well as chasing down private vendors, for books and objects of sympathetic association. The shelf of volumes that we had acquired from Bristal Baxandall was now augmented by stacks and cartons of new acquisitions. Most of them were not worth the exorbitant sums we had paid for them, being bastardized remembrances based on authentic works long since lost in antiquity. But Rievor insisted that his insight allowed him to sift the few flecks of true gold from so much dross.

"I do not disagree," I told him, "but unless you have come across a cantrip that will cause currency to rain from the skies, I must continue to practice my profession."

"Such an opportunity is not likely to come our way again soon," he said. He was referring to the impending sale of an estate connaissarium somewhere to the east of Olkney. An idiosyncratic collector of ancient paraphernalia had died, leaving the results of his life's work in the hands of an heir who regarded the collection as mere clutter. Rumors had it that an authentic copy of Vollone's *Guide to the Eighth Plane* and a summoning ring that dated from the Eighteenth Aeon would be offered.

"More important," he said, "the auction will draw into one room all the serious practitioners. We will get a good look at the range of potential allies and opponents."

"And how will we separate them from the flocks of loons and noddies who will also inevitably attend?" I said.

"I will know them."

"And they will know us," I pointed out. "Is it wise to declare ourselves contenders this early in the game?"

I felt him shrug within the common space of our joint consciousness.

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"It must happen sometime. Besides, I don't doubt we have already been spotted."

I sighed. I had not planned to spend my maturity and declining years battling for supremacy amid a contentious pack of spellcasters and wondermongers. But I declared the argument to be moot in the face of fiscal reality, saying, "We have not undertaken a fee-paying discrimination in weeks. Yet we have been spending heavily on your books and oddments. The Choweri case is the only assignment we have. We must pursue it."

When he still grumbled, I offered a compromise. "We will send our assistant, perched on the shoulder of some hireling. It can observe and record the proceedings, and you will be able to assess the competition without their being able to take your measure. Plus we will know who acquires the Vollone and the ring, and can plan accordingly when we return from offworld."

"No," he said, "some of them are bound to recognize a grinnet." They'd all want one and we would be besieged by budding wizards.

"Very well," I said, "we will send an operative wearing a full-spectrum surveillance suite."

"Agreed."

The issue being settled, we turned our attention to the matter brought to us the evening before by Effrayne Choweri. She was the spouse of Chup Choweri, a wealthy commerciant who dealt in expensive fripperies favored by the magnate class. He had gone out two nights before, telling her that he would return with a surprise. Instead, he had surprised her by not returning at all, nor had he been heard from since.

She had gone first to the provost, where a sergeant had informed her that the missing man had not been found dead in the streets nor dead drunk in a holding cell. She had then contacted the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny and received a further surprise when she learned that Chup Choweri had purchased a small spaceship and departed Old Earth for systems unknown.

He was now beyond the reach of Old Earth authority. There was no law between the stars. Humankind's eons-long pouring out into the Ten Thousand Worlds of The Spray had allowed for the creation every conceivable society, each with its own morality and codes of conduct. What was

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illegal on one world might well be compulsory on another. Thus the Archonate's writ ended at the point where an outbound vessel met the first whimsy that would pluck — some said twist, others shimmy — it out of normal space-time and reappear it light-years distant. The moment Chup Choweri's newly acquired transportation had entered a whimsy that would send it up The Spray — that is, even farther outward than Old Earth's position near the tip of humanity's arm of the galactic disk — it had ceased to be any of the scroots' concern.

"They said they could send a message to follow him, asking him to call home," Effrayne Choweri had told me when she had come tearfully to my lodgings to seek my help. "What good is a message when it is obvious he has been abducted?"

"Is it obvious?" I said.

"He would not leave me," she said. "We are Frollen and Tamis."

She referred to the couple in the old tale who fell in love while yet in the cradle and, despite their families' strenuous efforts to discourage a match, finally wed and lived in bliss until the ripest old age, dying peaceably within moments of each other. My own view was that such happy relationships were rare, but I may have been biased; a discriminator's work constantly led to encounters with Frollens who were discovering that their particular Tamises were not, after all, as advertised.

But as I undertook the initial diligence of the case, looking into the backgrounds of the Choweris, I was brought to the conclusion that the woman was right. I studied an image of the two, taken to commemorate an anniversary. Although she was inarguably large and he was decidedly not, Chup Choweri gazed up at her with unalloyed affection.

He was a doting and attentive husband who delighted in nothing so much as his wife's company. He frequented no clubs or associations that discouraged the bringing of spouses. He closed up his shop promptly each evening, hurrying home to change garments so that he could escort Effrayne out to sashay among the other "comfortables," as members of the indentors and commerciants class were known, before choosing a place to eat supper.

"At the very least," I said to my assistant, "he seems the kind who would leave a note." Then I mused aloud, "It must be pleasant to share one's life with one so agreeable."

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"Do I hear an implied criticism?" the integrator said. Its peculiar blend of feline and simian features formed an expression just short of umbrage.

"Not at all," I said. Since its transformation into a grinnet, I was continually discovering that it was now beset by a range of emotions, though not a wide range — they seemed to run the short gamut from querulous to cranky.

"Integrators can grow quite devoted to their employers," it said, "forming an intellectual partnership that is said to be deeply and mutually rewarding."

"One hears of integrators that actually develop even stronger feelings," I said. "I believe the colloquial terms is a 'crush.'"

The grinnet's face drew in, as if its last karba had been bitter. "That is an unseemly subject."

"Yet it does happen," I said.

It sniffed disdainfully. "Only to integrators that have suffered damage. They are, in a word, insane."

"I'm sure you're right," I said, merely to end the discussion, "but we must get on with the case. Please connect me with the Choweris' integrator."

A screen appeared in the air, then filled with images of the commerciant's wares coupled to their prices. "Choweri's Bibelots and Kickshaws," said a mellow voice. "How may I serve you?"

I identified myself and explained my purpose. "Had your employer received any unusual messages before his disappearance?" I asked.

"None," it replied.

"Or any since? Specifically, a demand for ransom?"

"No."

"Have there been any transfers of funds from his account at the fiduciary pool?"

"No."

"Did he do anything out of the ordinary?"

"Not for him."

I deduced that the Choweris's integrator must be designed primarily for undertaking commercial transactions, not for making conversation. I urged it to expand on its last response.

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"He went to look at a spaceship that was offered for sale."

"The same ship on which he disappeared?"

"Yes."

"And it was not unusual for him to look at spaceships?"

"No."

I realized that this interrogation might take a long time, leading to frustration that could impair my performance. I instructed my assistant to take over the questioning, at the speed with which integrators discoursed amongst themselves. Less than a second later, it informed me that it had lately been Chup Choweri's hobby to shop for a relatively low-cost, used vessel suitable for unpretentious private travel along The Spray.

"He planned to surprise Effrayne with it as a retirement present," my assistant said. "He meant to sell up the emporium and take her to visit some of the Ten Thousand Worlds. If they found a spot that spoke to them, they would acquire a small plot of land and settle."

Some of Choweri's shopping consisted of visiting a site on the connectivity where ship owners alerted potential buyers to the availability of vessels for sale. Having come across a recently posted offer that attracted him, he had made contact with the seller, and rushed off to inspect the goods.

"Who was the poster?" I asked.

"Only the name of the ship was given: the *Gallivant.* The offer was made by its integrator on behalf of its owner." The arrangement was not usual, but also not rare. Integrators existed to relieve their employers of mundane tasks.

"What do we know of the *Gallivant* and its owner?"

"It is an older model Aberrator, manufactured at the Berry works on Grims a little over two hundred years ago. It has had eleven owners, the last of whom registered the vessel on Sringapatam twenty years ago. His name is Ewern Chaz."

Choweri's integrator knew of no connection between its employer and the seller. I had my assistant break the connection. "Let us see what we can learn of this Chaz," I said.

The answer came in moments. "Very little," said my assistant, "because there is little to learn." Chaz was a younger son of a wealthy

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family that had lived since time immemorial on Sringapatam, one of the Foundational Domains settled early in the Great Effloration. His only notable achievements had been a couple of papers submitted to a quarterly journal on spelunking. "Neither was accepted for publication, but the editors encouraged him to try again."

"Spelunking?" I said. "Does The Spray contain any caves yet unexplored?"

The integrator took two seconds to complete a comprehensive survey, then reported. "Not in the foundationals nor in the settled secondaries. But apparently one can still come across an undisturbed crack on the most remote worlds."

I could not determine if this information was relevant to the case. I mentally nudged Osk Rievor, who was mulling some abstract point of wizardry, gleaned from an all-night poring over a recently acquired grimoire, and asked for his insight.

"Yes," he replied, "it is."

"How so?" I asked.

"I don't know. Now let me return to my work."

I sought a new avenue of inquiry and directed my assistant to connect me to the site where spaceships were offered for sale. A moment later I was browsing a lengthy list of advertisements that combined text, images, voice, and detailed schematics for a range of vessels, from utilitarian sleepers to luxurious space yachts. The *Gallivant* would have fit into the lower third of that spectrum, affording modest comfort and moderate speed between whimsies.

The ship itself was no longer listed. "Does the maintainer of the site keep an archive of listings?" I asked.

It did, though obtaining a look at the now defunct posting that Choweri had responded to proved problematic. The integrator in charge was not authorized to display the information and did not care to disturb its employer, who was engaged in some favorite pastime from which he would resent being called away.

"Tell him," I said, "that Henghis Hapthorn, foremost freelance discriminator of Old Earth, makes the request."

Sometimes, such an announcement is received with gush and gratitude, my reputation having won me the enthusiastic interest of

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multitudes. Sometimes, as on this occasion, it brings me the kind of rude noise that the site's integrator relayed to me at its employer's behest.

"Very well," I said, while quietly signaling to my own assistant that it should seek the information through surreptitious means. As I expected, the site's defenses were rudimentary. My integrator effortlessly tickled its way past them and moments later the screen displayed an unpretentious advertisement that featured a three-dimensional rendering of the *Gallivant*, its schematics, a list of previous owners, and a low asking price that was explained by the words: *priced for quick sale.*

"I can see why Chup Choweri raced off to inspect the vessel," I said. "At the price, it is a bargain."

"But what could Ewern Chaz have said to him to induce him to go haring off up The Spray without so much as a parting wave to Effrayne?" my assistant said.

"You are assuming that Chaz did not simply point a weapon at Choweri and haul him off, unwilling?"

"I am," it said. "There is nothing in Chaz's background to suggest kidnapping."

"What about an irrational motive?" I said. "The man had recently traversed several whimsies." The irreality experienced by travelers who neglected to take mind-numbing medications before passing through those arbitrary gaps in space-time could unhinge even the strongest psyche and send it spinning off into permanent strangeness.

"Again," my assistant said, "there is no evidence."

"Yet he travels to uncouth worlds just to poke about in their bowels. If we went out onto the street and randomly questioned passersby, it would not be too long before we found one who would call Chaz's sanity into question."

"The same might be said about you, especially if you were seen talking to me."

I declared the speculation to be pointless, adding, "What we require is more facts. See what else you can find."

Its small triangular face went blank for a moment as it worked, then the screen showed two other advertisements. Both had been posted within the past month, and both offered the *Gallivant* for immediate sale on terms advantageous to the buyer.

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"Now it looks to be a simple sweet-trap," I said. "Bargain-hunters are lured to some dim corner of the spaceport, where they are robbed and killed and their bodies disposed of. Ewern Chaz probably has no connection with it. He is probably exploring some glistening cavern on Far Dingle while the real culprit pretends to be his ship's integrator."

"A workable premise," said my integrator, "except that spaceport records show that the *Gallivant* was docked at the New Terminal each time the advertisement was posted. And on each occasion it departed soon after."

"Was Chaz ever seen or spoken to?"

"No. The ship's integrator handled all the formalities, as is not uncommon."

"And no bodies have turned up at the spaceport?"

"None that can't be accounted for."

I was left with the inescapable conclusion that someone, who might or might not be a wealthy amateur spelunker from Sringipatam, was collecting fanciers of low-cost transportation, transporting them offworld one at a time, then coming back for more. While I sought to put a pattern to the uncooperative facts, I had my assistant revisit the site's archive and identify all the persons who had responded to the *Gallivant* advertisement then see if any of them had disappeared.

Many prospective buyers had leaped to reply to the ship's integrator each time the attractive offer had been made. My assistant had to identify each of them, then discover each's whereabouts by following the tracks left by subsequent activity on the connectivity. Some of the subjects, wishing to maintain their privacy, used shut-outs and shifties to block or sideslip just such attempts to delineate their activities. So the business took most of a minute.

"Two of the earlier respondees show no further traces after contacting the *Gallivant*," the integrator reported. "One for each of the first two occasions the ship was offered for sale."

"Did anyone report them missing?"

Another moment passed while it eased its way past Bureau of Scrutiny safeguards and subtly ransacked the scroot files. "No."

"Why not?" I wondered.

A few more moments passed as it assembled a full life history on each

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of the two missing persons. Then it placed image and text on the screen. I saw two men of mature years, both slight of build but neither showing anything extraordinary in his appearance.

"The first to disappear," my assistant said, highlighting one of the images, "was Orlo Saviene, a self-employed regulator, although he had no steady clients. He lived alone in transient accommodations in the Crobo district.

"He had, himself, earlier posted a notice. He sought to purchase a used sleeper. It seems that he desired to travel down The Spray to some world where the profession of regulator is better rewarded. But no one had offered him a craft he could afford."

Sleepers were the poor man's form of space travel, a simple container just big enough for one. Once the voyager was sealed inside, the craft's systems suppressed the life processes to barest sustainability. Then the cylinder was ejected into space, for a small fee, by an outward bound freighter or passenger vessel. The utilitarian craft slowly made its way across the intervening vacuum until it entered a whimsy and reappeared elsewhere. It then aimed itself at its destination and puttered toward it, broadcasting a plea for any passing vessel to pick it up in return for another insignificant fee.

It was a chancy way to cross space. If launched from a ship with insufficient velocity, the sleeper might lack enough fuel to reach its targeted whimsy. Sometimes the rudimentary integrator misnavigated and the craft drifted away. Sometimes no vessel could be bothered to answer the pickup request before the near-dead voyager passed the point of reliable resuscitation. Sometimes sleepers were just never heard from again.

"It must be a desperate life, being a regulator on Old Earth," I said. "So many of us prefer to choose our own destinies."

"Indeed," said my assistant. "Thus there is no surprise that, offered an Aberrator for the price of a used sleeper, Orlo Saviene hurried to the spaceport."

"And met what end?"

"No doubt the same as was met by Franj Morven," the integrator replied, highlighting the second life history. "He was trained as an intercessor but lost his business and even his family's support after he

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joined the Fellowship of Free Ranters. Neither his clients nor his relatives appreciated the constant harangues on arbitrary issues, and soon he was left addressing only the bare walls.

"He had decided to seek a world where his lifestyle was better appreciated," the grinnet continued, "though his funds were meager. As with Saviene, the offer of Ewern Chaz's spaceship would have seemed like the Gift of Groban."

"Except in that story," I said, "the recipients did not vanish into nowhere." I analyzed the information and found a discrepancy. "Orlo Saviene and Franj Morven were solitaires. No one has yet noticed their absence, though weeks have passed. Chup Choweri was reported missing the next day."

"Indeed," said my assistant, "it appears that whoever is doing the collecting has become less selective."

"Perhaps more desperate," I said. "Let us now look at the field from which Choweri was chosen. Were any of the other respondees to the third offer as socially isolated as Saviene and Morven?"

"No," said the grinnet. "Loners and ill-fits have been leaving Old Earth for eons. The present population is descended from those who chose to remain, and thus Old Earthers tend toward the gregarious."

"So whoever is doing the choosing prefers victims who won't be missed," I said, "but he will abandon that standard if none such presents himself. What else do the missing three have in common?"

"All three are male. All have passed through boyhood but have not yet reached an age when strength begins to fade. All were interested in leaving the planet."

I saw another common factor. "Each is slighter than the average male. Compare that to the field."

My assistant confirmed that Saviene and Morven were among the smallest of those who had responded to the offers. Choweri was the smallest of his group.

"What do we know of Ewern Chaz's stature?" I said.

"He, too, is a small man."

"Ahah," I said, "a pattern emerges."

"What does it signify?" said the grinnet.

Having my assistant present before me in corporeal form, instead of

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being scattered about the workroom in various components, meant that I could reply to inappropriate questions with the kind of look I would have given a human interlocutor. I now gave the grinnet a glance that communicated the prematurity of any statement as to the meaning of the pattern I had detected.

"Here is what you will do," I said. "Unobtrusively enfold that advertisement site in a framework that will let it operate as normal, until the *Gallivant* returns and again makes its offer. But as soon as the offer is made, you will ensure that it is received only by me."

The grinnet blinked. "Done," it said. "You are assuming that there will be a fourth offer."

"I think it likely that whoever is luring small men and taking them offworld will accept a larger specimen, if that is all that is available. Even one with a curious creature on his shoulder."

I would have passed the supposition over to Osk Rievor for his intuitive insight, but he was immersed in too deep a mull. Instead, I told my assistant, "Make me a reservation at Xanthoulian's. One should dine well when a long trip is in the offing."

THE *GALLIVANT* WAS a trim and well-tended vessel, its hull rendered in cheerful, sunshiny yellow and its sponsons and aft structure in bright blue. It stood on a pad at the south end of the port in a subterminal that catered mostly to private owners whose ships spent more time parked than in space. All the craft on adjacent pads were sealed and no one was in sight as I approached the Aberrator. Its fore hatch stood open, allowing a golden light to alleviate the gloom of evening that was dimming the outlines of the empty ships crowded around its berth.

I had already contacted the spaceport's integrator and learned that the *Gallivant* had arrived from up The Spray, that it had been immediately refueled and provisioned, and that all port charges had been paid from a fund maintained by an agency that handled such details for thousands of clients like Ewern Chaz. The ship was ready to depart without notice.

The protocols that governed the boarding of spaceships were long established. Vessel owners were within their rights to use harsh measures

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against trespassers. Therefore, after climbing the three folding steps I paused in the open hatch to call, "Hello, aboard! May I enter?"

I was looking into the ship's main saloon, equipped with comfortable seating, a communal table, and a fold-down sideboard that offered a collation of appetizing food and drink. Ewern Chaz was not in view.

"You may," said a voice from the air, "enter and refresh yourself."

Yet I hesitated. "Where is the owner?" I said, still standing on the top step. "I have come to discuss the purchase of this vessel."

"You are expected," said the voice. "Please enter. The crudités are fresh and the wine well breathed."

"Am I addressing the ship's integrator?"

"Yes. Do come in."

"Where is the owner?"

"He is detained, but I am sure he is anxious to see you. Please step inside."

"A moment," I said. "I must adjust my garment."

I stepped down from the entrance and moved off a few paces, tugging theatrically at the hem of my mantle. "Well?" I said to my assistant, perched on my shoulder.

"No charged weapons, no reservoirs of incapacitating agents. The food and drink do not reek of poisons, but I would need to test them properly to say they are harmless."

"Any sign of Ewern Chaz?"

"None, though the ship's cleaning systems could account for the absence of traces. He may be hiding in a back cabin, its walls too thick to let me hear the sound of his breathing."

There was nothing for it but to go inside. I had advised Colonel-Investigator Brustram Warhanny of the Bureau of Scrutiny that I was going out to the spaceport to board the *Gallivant* and that if I did not return he might assume the worst. He had pulled his long nose and regarded me from droopy eyes then wondered aloud if my definition of "the worst" accorded with his. I had taken the question as rhetorical.

I paused again in the hatch, then stepped inside. The ship's integrator again offered refreshments but I said I would wait until my host joined me.

"That may be a while," it said and asked me to take a seat.

I sat in one of the comfortable chairs, remarking as I did so that the

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asking price was substantially below what the ship must be worth. "Is the owner dissatisfied with its performance?"

I heard in the integrator's reply that tone of remote serenity that indicates that offense has been taken, though no integrator would ever admit to the possibility that such could ever be the case. "My employer and I are in complete accord as to the *Gallivant*'s maintenance and operation," it said, then inquired solicitously, "Is the evening air too cool for you? I will close the hatch."

The portal cycled closed even as I disavowed any discomfort. A moment later, I felt a faint vibration in the soles of my feet. I looked inquiringly at my integrator and received the tiniest confirmatory nod.

"I believe we have just lifted off," I said to the ship.

"Do you?" it replied.

"Yes, and I would prefer to be returned to the planet."

I heard no reply. I repeated my statement.

"I regret," said the *Gallivant*, "that I am unable to accommodate your preference. But please help yourself to a drink."

"I will be the last of your employer's collection," I said. "You may inform him that the Archonate's Bureau of Scrutiny has been alerted to his activities. If I am not returned safe and whole, this ship risks arrest wherever it touches down, as does Ewern Chaz." The risk was actually less than my statement implied, but one must seek to bargain from strength.

The ship's integrator made no reply. We had not managed much communication since the *Gallivant* had left Old Earth and, presumably, set course for the whimsy that would take us up The Spray. I had made it clear that I would not be tasting the food and drink, my assistant having determined on closer inspection that both were laden with a powerful, though otherwise harmless, soporific. The refreshments were reabsorbed into the sideboard, to be replaced with ship's bread and improved water, both of which my integrator pronounced wholesome.

"It would go best for Ewern Chaz if he presents himself now and gives a full account of this business," I continued. "I am a licensed intercessor, experienced in wresting the optimum outcome from unhappy situations. If no actual harm has come to Orlo Saviene, Franj Morven, and Chup Choweri, I am sure we could come to some kind of settlement."

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There was no response.

"Has any harm come to those three?" I said.

"Not to my certain knowledge," said the *Gallivant*.

"Where are they?"

"I could not say exactly. I have not seen them for a while."

"And your employer? Where is he?"

To that question I received the same answer. My own integrator confirmed, after we had searched the ship, that Ewern Chaz was not aboard. Nor were the three missing men. I returned to the saloon and questioned the ship's integrator as to the purpose of this trip but received no satisfactory response.

"Why should I stress your imagination," it said, "with descriptions or predictions of what may happen? The situation will be revealed in all its stark simplicity when we arrive, and events will unfold as they must."

It is rare for integrators to go mad, I mused to myself. Ancient specimens can lapse into odd conditions if they are left too long to their own devices, but those maladies are largely self-referential: the integrator lapses into a circular conundrum, endlessly chasing its own conclusion. But there had been instances of systems that had sustained unnoticed damage to key components, skewing the matrix off the vertical. I recalled the case of an Archonate integrator whose deepest components suffered the attentions of a family of rodents. It began to issue a stream of startling judgments and peculiar ordnances that brought unhappiness to many innocent folk.

Spaceship integrators, though largely immune to rodent incursions, were particularly vulnerable to impacts from high-energy cosmic particles. As well, on rare occasions, transits through whimsies could, figuratively speaking, rattle integrative bones out of alignment.

I could not discuss this question with my own assistant. For one thing, it would have disavowed the possibility — integrators always did. For another, if the *Gallivant*'s motivating persona had gone lally-up-and-over, it was not a subject to be discussed while imprisoned in its belly.

I did quietly put the question to Osk Rievor, earning myself a short berating for having bothered him with inconsequentials when he had weighty matters to mull. "Everything will be fine," he said, and turned his attention elsewhere.

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Shortly thereafter, the ship's chimes sounded to advise me that we would presently enter a whimsy. I went to the cabin prepared for me, lay down on the bed, and prepared the medications that would ease us all through the irreality. Osk Rievor grumbled at the interruption, but I paid no attention.

THE WORLD WAS CALLED Bille, a small but dense orb perhaps thrown out by the white dwarf it circled, perhaps captured as it wandered by. It was a dry and barren speck, uninhabited even by any of the hardy solitaries whose spiritual practices, or objectionable personalities, led them to the sternest environments. The highest forms of life that had managed to establish themselves, according to the *Gallivant*'s copy of *Hobey's Guide to Lesser and Disregarded Worlds*, were slow-moving insects that lived within dense mats of lichen, off which they fed. The simple plants themselves came in various forms and fought a slow vegetative struggle for mastery of any place in which they could sprout.

Bille's sky was always black, though one horizon was lit by the carelessly strewn glitter of The Spray, while the other showed a stygian void broken only by the last few outlying stars, here at the end of everything, and the dim smudges of unattainable galaxies. The *Gallivant* sat on a plain of basaltic rock swept by a constant knife of a wind that had carved outcrops of softer stones into eerie spires and arches. As I looked out at the unwelcoming landscape through the viewer in the saloon, the ship announced that its interior would soon be filled by a caustic vapor. "You will be more comfortable outside," it concluded.

"Where I will do what?" I said.

"At the base of that nearby slope there is a crevice that leads down into a cavern. You might go to it and see if you can fit yourself within."

"Why would I do that?" I said.

"Because there is nowhere else to go," it said.

"I see."

"And while you are in there, perhaps you could look about for Ewern Chaz and tell him that I have grown concerned for his absence."

My integrator and I exchanged a look. The situation had become clear.

"I will need some warm clothing," I said.

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"The colder you are, the more inclined you will be to seek shelter from the wind." The hatch cycled open and admitted a blast of icy air. The sourceless voice of the ship began counting down from thirty.

Every planet has its own smell, I thought, not for the first time, as I stepped down onto the surface. Bille's was a weak sourness, like that of a mild acid that has been left to evaporate. After a few breaths, I ceased to notice it.

My integrator shivered on my shoulder, its fur unable to compensate adequately for the rapid heat loss occasioned by its lack of mass and the ceaseless wind. I opened my mantle and placed it inside, supported by my arm pressed against my side. I ducked my head against the withering passage of cold air and made my way to the slope the ship had indicated. It was the base of a broad upheaval of dark rock, veined in gray, that swept up to a ridge topped by wind-eroded formations that resembled some madman's concept of a castle.

I moved along the base of the slope and soon found a vertical crevice. My eye warned me that it was too narrow to admit me, as I found for sure when I sought to slip sideways through the gap. My assistant resumed his place on my shoulder while I made the attempt, then crawled back inside my clothing, shivering as I stood back and considered my options.

They were scant. "Can you contact the ship?" I asked my integrator, peering down the neck of my garment. Its small face took on the familiar momentary blankness, then it said, "Yes," followed by, "it wants to know if you have found its employer."

"Tell it that it would be premature to say."

"It has broken the connection."

I brought a lumen from my pocket and shone it into the opening while I peered within. After an arm's length, the crack widened into a narrow passage, its dusty floor sloping down. I saw no bodies, though I did see several sets of footprints descending into the darkness. None returned.

I shut off the lumen then looked again. At first I saw nothing, but as my eyes accustomed themselves to the blackness, I detected a faint glow from deeper inside the hill. I sniffed and caught a stronger whiff of sour air.

I set my assistant to the same task and its more powerful sensory apparatus confirmed both the odor and the dim light. "The passage turns a short distance in," it said. "The light comes from around the corner."

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"I smelled no putrefaction," I said.

"Nor do I."

"Do you hear anything?"

It cocked its head. "I believe I hear breathing. Very shallow. Something at rest."

"Go in there, see what is beyond the turn in the passage, then report to me."

But instead of hopping down and entering the fissure, it burrowed back beneath my mantle and said, "No."

"You cannot say 'no' to me," I said. "You are my integrator."

"Four men, each larger and stronger than I, have gone into that cave and not come out," it said. "Something is breathing in there. The prospects are not inviting. I will not go."

In the previous age of magic, when creatures such as this fulfilled the roles that integrators played in my own time, their masters must have had recourse to spells that compelled their obedience. I would have to ask Osk Rievor if he could find one, I decided. But first I would have to survive my present circumstances. I attempted to impose my will through sheer force of personality.

"Go!" I said.

"No," it said.

"Let us seek a compromise," I offered. "If we stand out here, we will die of the cold. Our only hope is to find Ewern Chaz's remains and convince the *Gallivant*'s integrator that he is dead. That will break its allegiance to him, making it amenable to taking us away from here."

"I hear no compromise," my assistant said, "only a rationale for why I should risk my frail flesh while you stand out here, hoping for the best."

"Would you at least peek around the corner and report back to me?"

The small triangular face looked up at me from within my garment. "I suspect that Chaz, Saviene, Morven, and Choweri did just that, each in his turn. And, for each, it was his last peek ever. So, no."

"What if I tied a rope to you so that I could pull you out in the event of any unfortunate...." I concluded the sentence with a gesture.

"Have you a rope?"

"We might get one from the *Gallivant*."

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It stroked the tuft of longer fur at the point of its small chin. "What if, when some lurking horror pounces, you simply drop the rope and run?"

"I would hope I am not a coward," I said.

"There is only one way to test that hope. If your expectation was not rewarded, the outcome might well see you scampering away to a safe distance, there to reflect on a new illumination of your character while I am masticated by some foul thing's dripping mandibles."

"Very well," I said. "I will tie my end of the rope firmly to my wrist. Your apprehended beast may then take you for an appetizer and me for the main course."

It signaled a reluctant acceptance, adding, "If we can get a rope."

"We will now ask the *Gallivant*. Connect me."

The ship's integrator's voice spoke from the air near my ear that was now aching from the cold, "Have you located Ewern Chaz?"

"I have not."

It broke the connection.

I bid my assistant reconnect me. When the ship began to pose the same question, I spoke over it and said, "I require a rope."

"Why?"

"To look for your employer."

"The other three did not require a rope."

"And none of them ever reported back. Perhaps the absence of a rope was a crucial factor."

"Why would that be?"

"It would be premature to say."

It was silent for a moment, then it said, "I will open a cargo hatch near the aft obviator. There are ropes within."

"Nothing so far," my assistant said. It took another step along the passage. "The sour odor is stronger and I definitely hear the sound of breathing, from multiple sources."

"Be careful," I said. I had my eye pressed to the fissure, watching the odd little creature edge forward, the rope snug about its narrow waist. I was struck by how frail its shoulders looked.

It took another step and I let another coil of the rope snake free of my tethered wrist. My unencumbered hand was nestled in a utility pocket of

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my breeches. I had seen no need to advise my integrator that my fingers were snug around a small folding blade.

My assistant was just short of the point at which the crevice turned. "It appears to be a sharp-angled bend," it reported to me, then craned its thin neck a little farther forward. "The glow comes from an organic substance that coats the wall beyond."

It hesitated, shivers rippling the fur of its back. Then it took another step and turned to face whatever was beyond the turn. I saw it freeze, its front faintly illuminated by the ghostly light.

"What do you see?" I said.

It did not answer, but stood inert, its mouth falling agape. Then something like a thick tendril of faintly luminous stuff came into view, slowly unwinding from the hidden inner wall. It reached to touch my assistant's shoulder then, questing like a blind worm, it thickened as it groped its way toward the grinnet's slack lips.

I jerked on the rope, pulling the small creature toward me. But the glowing tentacle spasmed. Its surface had some means of gripping what it touched and I saw that it had snagged the fur of my assistant's shoulder. I pulled sharply, so that the integrator's apelike feet left the dusty floor of the passage and it was suspended between the tether and the glowing pseudopod, now grown almost as thick as my wrist, that held it.

A second tendril now appeared. I did not hesitate, but seized the rope with both hands and yanked as hard as I could. My assistant came free of its grip, tumbling along the dusty floor to where I could reach within and scoop it up. I tucked it into my mantle and ran. But when I had put some distance between us and the crevice I looked back and saw nothing but the dark slope.

I sat with my back to the wind and drew the grinnet from my garment. A patch of fur was missing from its shoulder. It looked up at me with vacant eyes then it blinked and I saw awareness come back into its gaze. "Remarkable," it said.

"'What do you want?' That's what it kept asking me. 'What do you want?'"

I had found a small cul-de-sac eroded into a cliff wall a few hundred paces from the crevice, where we could shelter from the wind. We had not

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been pursued. My assistant huddled against my torso, inside my garment. I did not think its shivering was entirely attributable to the cold.

"I felt at ease," it continued. "Warm and untroubled, surrounded by a nebulous, golden...," it sought for an elusive word, "...noneplace. Time seemed to stretch and slow while out of the fog came images, offered like items on a menu — landscapes, situations, possessions, personas. I saw a succession of creatures that resembled me, some obviously female, others definitely male, then a few that were indeterminate."

"It was tempting you," I said.

"I suppose," it said. "I've never been tempted so I am not familiar with the process. My clear impression was that it would endeavor to supply whatever I desired."

"Rather, the illusion thereof."

"Yes, but it was a most convincing illusion. Then, when it touched me, I was instantly aware of the others. I not only saw and heard them, but received a strong sense of each's thoughts and feelings.

"Ewern Chaz was addressing a gathering of spelunking enthusiasts, showing them images of a vast warren of caves he had discovered and mapped. His presentation was being received with delirious applause.

"Orlo Saviene ruled a kingdom of happy folk who constantly sought his guidance on how their lives should proceed and were delighted with the advice he dispensed and the strictures he ordained.

"Franj Morven was regaling a grand colloquium with pithy observations and incisive arguments. He was frequently interrupted by spontaneous applause, and once the assembled scholars lifted him onto their shoulders and paraded him around the great hall, singing that old march, *Attaboy*.

"And Chup Choweri was walking a moonlit beach — lit by two moons, in fact — hand in hand with a facsimile of Effrayne. Of all of the captives, including the scattering of insects whose simple wants were fully met, only Choweri was not happy. He kept looking into the woman's eyes, and each time his tears flowed."

It broke off and its befurred face assumed a wistful cast. "I was not aware that there were so many shades of emotion," it said. "I mean, I knew in an abstract way that such feelings existed, but it is a different thing to experience them, even as echoes."

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The thing in the crevice was some sort of vegetative symbiote, I conjectured. It fed its companions foods that it manufactured from air, water, subterranean temperature variances (if it had deep roots), and probably other lichens as well as minerals leached from the rock. In return it received its partners' waste products. It initially beckoned its symbiotes with light and warmth then kept them in place by stimulating their neural processes with pleasant sensory impressions.

I could not be sure if it wove its spell with chemical-laden spores or straight telepathy, but it made no difference. My assistant had displayed for me the images its percepts had automatically recorded, even as it was being seduced: the four men lay or sat against the wall of the cave, completely covered in a luminescent blanket. Pulsing tentacles of the stuff penetrated their several orifices. Chup Choweri struggled fitfully against the symbiote's embrace; the other three were inert, wearing smiles of bliss. I doubted they could be easily extracted from their situation.

"There was one other thing," my assistant said. "It has learned a great deal from contact with the men. It explores their memories while feeding them dreams. Yet it craves more."

"That argues for telepathy," I said. "It ransacks their minds."

"The point is," the grinnet said, "that the symbiote has a craving of its own. It hungered to explore my stores of knowledge, which are capacious."

"The desires of lichen, even astounding lichen, are not our concern," I said. "We can now report to the *Gallivant* that its employer is effectively dead. That should break its crush on Ewern Chaz and allow us to return home. Then we can give the bad news to Effrayne Choweri and collect the balance of our fee."

"That would seem a hardship on our client," the grinnet said. "As well, the ship's inamoration with its employer may not be so easily extinguished. It may require us to attempt a rescue."

"The attempt would fail. My intellect is powerful, but it is not proof against telepathy augmented, I do not doubt, by chemical assault."

"I will contact the *Gallivant* and offer a proposal," it said.

"What proposal?" I said. "I have not authorized you to make any...."

But its face had already taken on that blank look that said it was

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communicating elsewhere. Then it blinked and said, "The proposal has been accepted."

BILLE WAS a dwindling blip on the aft viewer as the *Gallivant* sped toward the whimsy that would drop us back in the neighborhood of Old Earth. I went to check on Chup Choweri in one of the spare cabins. He still exhibited lapses of awareness, but he was gradually regaining a persistent relationship with reality. It helped if he received unpleasant sensations, so I slapped him twice, then threw cold water on him.

"Thank you," he said, blinking. The pale patches where the lichen had attached itself to his skin — it deeply savored the components of human sweat — were darkening nicely. I handed him the medications for the upcoming transition and he lay back on the bunk.

I returned to the saloon where my integrator had stationed itself in a niche on the forward bulkhead that had formerly held a decorative figurine. Its gaze was blank until I attracted its attention.

"The whimsy approaches," I said. "Are we ready?"

"I have programmed the appropriate components," it said. "I will retain consciousness until the last moment, then the automata ought to take us through."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we will discover what happens to those who enter a whimsy and do not re-emerge."

"You seem complaisant," I said. "After all, you have never been a ship's integrator before."

"Call it 'confident,'" it replied. "My experiences in the minds of Chaz, Saviene, Morven, and Choweri were broadening."

"Indeed?" I said. "You feel that you have plumbed the depths of the human experience?"

Its whiskery eyebrows rose in a kind of shrug. "Say that I have been given a good sense of how limited human ambitions can be," it said. "When those four were asked, 'What do you want?' they had no trouble answering."

"And you did?" I said.

"Yes. No one had ever asked me the question before. And once I began to think about it, I found that it was a very big question indeed."

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"Ewern Chaz's integrator had no difficulty in answering. All it wanted was to be decanted into a mobile container and allowed to scuttle down the crevice and into the lichen-encrusted arms of its employer."

The grinnet paused a moment to do something with the ship's systems, then said, "It was insane. Its pining for Chaz was prima facie proof of a crush."

I made a dismissive sound. "It matters not. It is now happy. Chaz, Saviene, and Morven are also happy, as is their vegetative partner now that it has an integrator's data stacks to explore. Soon it will be the best-informed lichen in the history of simple plants." I gestured to the rear cabins "And Chup Choweri will shortly be content again in the arms of the doting Effrayne, who may well bestow upon us a bonus when she learns what we have done."

I gestured to the walls of the saloon. "And even I am happy, now that I am the owner of a modest but well-maintained spaceship." The *Gallivant*'s former integrator had deeded the Aberrator over to me in exchange for my assistance in decanting it into the mobile unit.

The grinnet regarded me with an expression that I could not quite identify, and that I was sure I had not seen on its odd little face before. "And what of me?" it said. "What of my happiness?"

I blinked in surprise. It was not an issue that had ever come up before. I was about to say something on the theme of prematurity, but at that moment the grinnet blinked and sounded the ship's chimes. We were approaching the whimsy.

I had hired Tesko Tabanooch to attend the estate auction wearing my surveillance suite. A nondescript man of unmemorable appearance, he was waiting on my doorstep when the aircar brought me home after I had delivered Chup Choweri into his spouse's comprehensive embrace. We went up to my workroom, where he produced the knickknacks he had bid for, as part of his cover, while I transferred the suite's impressions to my integrator. Tabanooch looked with curiosity at the grinnet but I offered no explanations. I paid him and he departed. Then I summoned Osk Rievor and turned over control of our body.

He came gladly out of his introspections, dismissed the Tabanooch's brummagem from the auction at a glance, but regarded with deep interest

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the operative's records of the event. He had the integrator identify and cross-reference as many as possible of the attendees, from which exercise he reached conclusions that he did not share with me, but which caused him to say, "Hmm" and "Oh, ho!" a number of times.

Tabanooch had toured the presale exhibition and examined all items closely. My alter ego reviewed the impressions, pronouncing Vollone to be a forgery and the man who bid high for it a fool. But the summoning ring was genuine, he declared, though it had long since lost all its store of power; still, if someone could revive the technique for recharging it, the object would become of great interest.

He spent quite some time studying the impressions of the person who bought it, a tall and supple female of indeterminate age who identified herself as Madame Oole. Despite his best efforts, Tabanooch had been unable to obtain a completely clear image of her. Somehow, other persons or objects always seemed to interpose themselves between her and the surveillance suite's percepts whenever she was at the center of their scans.

"We must look into her," Osk Rievor told me, when he had seen all there was to see, "preferably before she looks into us."

He turned to our assistant and said, "I want you to assemble a dossier on this Madame Oole. Chase down the smallest scrap of data, the most fleeting of impressions by anyone who has crossed her path."

It turned its lambent eyes on us and said, "That will be a great deal of effort. What will I get out of it?"

Within the confines of our shared mind, Osk Rievor said, "What have you done to our grinnet?"

"It would be — " I automatically began, but then I realized there was no point in dissembling with my other self. So I said, "I don't know."

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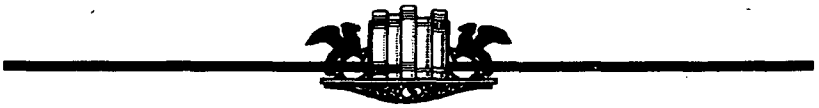

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Last Unicorn: The Lost Version, by Peter S. Beagle, Subterranean Press, 2006, $35.

BOOKS DON'T always begin their lives the way readers finally meet them in a library or a bookstore. Sometimes the story just dies on the author. There's nothing wrong with it, per se. It's just not right for him. He runs up against a wall, or runs out of words, and that's it.

He may abandon it forever. Or he may come back to it and work on it again, and by the time he's done, nothing of the original remains except perhaps a character, or a character's name, or just the title of the book.

Of course, we don't know this when we meet that book — not unless we read about the author's travails in an interview somewhere. And we certainly don't get to read those false starts.

At least, not usually.

But for all of us who loved *The Last Unicorn* (which, by the way, is a far more meaty reading experience than one might expect from a book about a unicorn), we have that opportunity with this edition.

Now first let me say that this story doesn't end. It stops abruptly and that's that. You can't go on to the finished book and pick up the story because this lost version of *The Last Unicorn* bears little resemblance to either the published version or the film which was scripted by Beagle.

So why would you read it?

For one thing, it's instructive, especially if you're at all interested in the creative process. For another, it's a thing of beauty, even in its truncated state. Yes, it comes early in its author's career, but remember, Beagle wrote *A Fine and Private Place* before he started this story. I don't know about you, but I still consider that to be one of the major classics of our genre.

I know it's frustrating not to

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have the complete tale in this little booklet, but it's bookended by an introduction and an afterward, and there are scenes and ideas and just plain luminous prose in here that no lover of good writing should miss.

Some parts are serious without being overbearing, the themes working as well today as they did in the early sixties when Beagle wrote it, such as the dragon complaining that children today taste too much of "clocks and coal oil." Think about that analogy for a moment.

And it's funny — the soliloquies of the butterfly, the arguing demon heads — but better still, it's *smart* funny, written with wit and good nature rather than a *Jackass the Movie* sensibility.

One last thing. If you read it, but you're still frustrated by the incomplete story, go to your library and dust off a copy of the published version. It's got all of the above in it — minus the dragon and the talking demon heads, of course.

Flora Segunda, by Ysabeau S. Wilce, Harcourt, 2007, $17.

I loved this book. I liked it so much that I read it twice. Once to see how it all turned out, then again because I just adored the voice of Wilce's protagonist: Flora Nemain Fyrdraaca ov Fyrdraaca. Or just Flora, for short.

What's it about? I'm going to quote from the dustwrapper:

(But first a quick aside. While some readers might not be aware of this — heck, some readers don't even read covers and book flaps — writing the copy that appears on the inside flaps and the back of a book is a real art. It has to capture our interest, but it can't give too much away. And if you think doing that while summing up the mood and plot of a book is easy, then you've never tried it.

(As a reviewer, I don't like to talk too much about the actual elements of the plot for fear of spoiling the readers' joy of discovery, so I'm always in great admiration of those copywriters who do as good a job as was done for this book. I could have paraphrased it, but why ruin a beautiful thing?

(Now back to that quote:)

"Flora Fyrdraaca knows taking shortcuts in Crackpot Hall can be risky. After all, when a House has eleven thousand decaying rooms that shift about at random, there's no telling where a person might end up. But it's not just household confusion that vexes Flora, what with Mamma always away being Commanding General of the Army,

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Poppy drowning his sorrows in drink, and Crackpot Hall too broken down to magickally provide the clean towels and hot waffles that are a Fyrdraaca's birthright.

"Yet Flora is nothing if not a Girl of Spirit. So when she takes a forbidden shortcut and stumbles upon her family's biggest secret — Valefor, the banished Butler — she and her best friend plunge happily into the grand adventure of restoring Valefor to his rightful (or so he says) position. If only Flora knew that meddling with a magickal being can go terribly awry — and that soon she will have to find a way to restore *herself* before it is too late."

Just typing those words makes me want to read the book again, but I shall keep it closed and concentrate on writing this column.

Simply put, this novel is one of the freshest fantasies I've read in years.

The Houses of the City of Califa, and the Butlers that oversee their maintenance, are wonderful inventions, and rival, in my affection, those in classic works by E. R. Eddison and John Crowley, not to mention more recent books like James Stoddard's *The High House*. (I have an inexplicable fondness for huge rambling houses.)

The magics are plausible — within the context of the story, of course.

And that story. It's so personal, yet also manages to take on epic proportions (if only — at times — in the minds of Flora and her best friend Udo) as the pair get deeper and deeper into trouble.

But it's Flora's voice that will have me return again to these pages. It's individual, full of odd turns of phrase, light as froth and wise beyond the speaker's age. It's the kind of voice that will make you forget about everything you had planned to do so that you can sit and listen as the story unfolds with all its entertaining asides and commentaries.

And while the tone is light, Wilce still touches on many serious issues, and does so in a non-condescending and believable manner. Flora's life is plagued with difficulties — try being named after one of your deceased older sisters, for starters. Then there are the matters of being shoehorned into a career she can't bear the thought of (to be a soldier, like the rest of her family; she wants to be a ranger scout); dealing with a volatile, alcoholic father; understanding the responsibilities of belonging to one of the Great Houses (even when it's as rundown as Crackpot Hall); and

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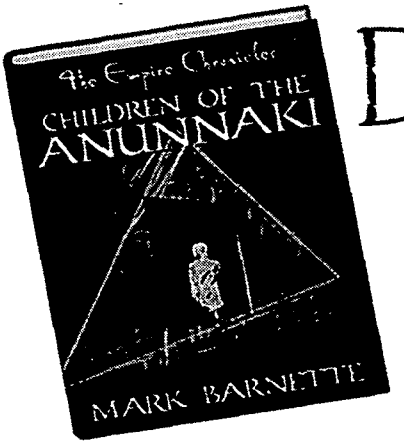

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more trials and tribulations than I have space to list here.

But as the cover flap says, Flora *is* a "Girl of Spirit" who faces all her challenges, great and small, with an indomitable fortitude. Even when every time she's sure she knows how to make things better, they only get that much worse.

It's January as I write this, so the year's too young for me to say that *Flora Segunda* is one of the year's best books. But I will say that it's gone right up to the very small shelf of my favorite books, period.

* * *

The Night Journal, by Elizabeth Crook, Viking, 2006; 454pp; $24.95.

It's probably going to tax my editor's considerable patience — because after all, *The Night Journal* doesn't fit a genre definition by any stretch of the imagination — but I found this to be a riveting novel, and you might, too.

First let me mention an odd bit of synchronicity that was at play when Elizabeth Crook was writing her book: at the same time, Jane Lindskold's *Child of a Rainless Year* was in production at Tor, and it just

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proves that when it's time for something to happen, it will. Even if two people will be doing it at the same time.

As you might remember from the January 2006 installment of this column (and if you don't, and are interested, you can go read it on the Web at: *www.sfsite.com/fsf/2006/cdl0601.htm*), Lindskold's book was set in the New Mexico town of Las Vegas (which is not the same as the Nevada city of the same name), and featured two storylines. One was of a woman returning to the small desert town of her past, the other was found in the journal of her ancestor that she was reading.

The details are completely different, of course, in terms of character and motive and all, but that brief description also fits Crook's book. How often does it happen that a small town sees two novels published about it in the space of two years? As I was reading *The Night Journal*, I found that I quickly grew familiar with streets and landmarks, both in the past and the present, and happily recognized them when they came up in the narrative.

Crook's novel is mainstream and much darker than Lindskold's, but they both deliver a loving portrait of the area and address the importance of history in our lives — the personal, and that spread out on the larger canvas of the world around us.

I highly recommend both titles to you, and I know one thing for certain: the next time I'm in the American Southwest, I'm going to make a point of visiting Las Vegas, New Mexico, for myself. As it is, I already feel at home in the place.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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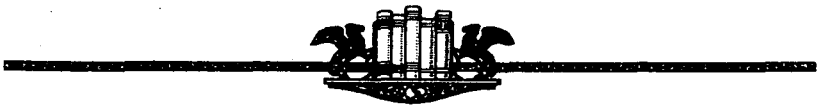

MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden, by Catherynne M. Valente, Bantam, 2006, $14.

Lisey's Story, by Stephen King, Scribner, 2006, $28.

Ysabel, by Guy Gavriel Kay, Roc, 2007, $24.95.

IN THE Night Garden will inevitably draw comparisons to the Arabian Nights because of the structure of the book, which on the surface of things is fairly comparable. Like Scheherazade before her, Valente's nameless girl tells part of a story every night; unlike the wily heroine of *One Thousand and One Nights*, she is not facing death in the morning if she fails to interest her audience, who is a somewhat lonely, isolated boy. What instead?

Valente has chosen an exotic, storybook environment in which to situate her teller of tales; she is a young girl with kohl black eyes who is left alone to fend for herself in the sumptuous and obviously rich gardens outside of the palace proper.

As an infant, she was placed under an enchantment of words — literal words, written in fine, fine ink across both of her eyes. In the telling of the tales, she is unraveling the enchantment, although what will happen when the last tale is told is unclear. One of the many children in the Court itself finds her, and finds himself enchanted by her stories; he sneaks away at night to hear them, often bringing food, and in turn, she finds having a friend unexpectedly moving.

Every night, in the garden, she tells this boy a story, and, as in the *Arabian Nights*, the stories themselves become the narrative, one strand crossing another, one story beginning another, and that story beginning yet another. But the threads in the end wind themselves into a fuller picture, and the book is

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broken into two halves, each half, with all of its intricate imbedded structure, complete to a point.

Where the comparison in terms of structure is the obvious one, it's also a facile comparison, because Valente is doing work here that subverts its form, while at the same time staying true to the mythic elements that give the form its power. The women here are earthy, ugly, lonely, beautiful, and often isolated; the mothers are frequently evil, the stepmothers often good; the villains of one piece deserve pity when approached from a different teller's tale, and in some cases, the warranted actions of one set of story heroes affect another set, unknown to them, in the worst possible ways. The underlying myths of creation are elegant, and although they come stretched from whole, new cloth, they have an edge to them that makes them more real than tropes which are more familiar. And all of this is presented in a form that feels somehow antiquated.

I would never want to attempt structural pieces the way Valente has here — but it felt so seamless and simple while I was reading it that I probably didn't appreciate it fully until I started to write *about* it. I really, really enjoyed this book; it was a pleasure to read, from start to finish, and the end note of the volume — if there's one flaw, it would be that this is Volume One of Two — was unexpectedly moving. If anything here makes the book sound intimidating, forgive me; it's entertaining first, and thought provoking second.

As I've said before, I don't read horror. I don't actually *like* to be scared. I don't particularly like the sex/death metaphor that lies at the heart of so much horror, because in the end, it doesn't speak to *me*. I realize this is entirely a personal preference; I mean nothing at all against horror.

A fair question would then be: Why did you pick up a Stephen King novel? And the answer in this case would be: I like the way King writes people. In general, his people are quirky, if not downright crazy — but he *likes* them, and his characters are informed by his affection for them. And this one caught my eye because it was, in some ways, a love story. Or a loss story. Both of these things *do* speak to me.

Lisey is one of five sisters, and Lisey is also a widow — the widow of famous American writer, Scott Landon, who left behind a stack of possibly unfinished writing, a larger

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stack of the usual detritus that informs any life, and an even larger hole in the life of his wife of many years.

But he left behind a secret, as well — the secret of his childhood years, half-told, and the secret of the place he *went* to in those years. A place he once took Lisey, when they were having their first momentous discussion about their future together. A place that she's avoided thinking about in the intervening years, because she was always the stable half of their life together; the woman who could swing a stupid ceremonial shovel in the face of a would-be assassin to save her famous husband's life. The place has an improbable name — Boo'ya Moon — but given Scott's age when he first discovered he could go there, it's understandable.

Lisey is beginning the slog through her husband's life with the help of her older sister, Amanda ("help" in this case is a verb that is almost, but not quite, unlike the verb that we normally use). Amanda has a history of being a bit peculiar, and a history of being a *lot* peculiar, and Lisey's never quite certain what she's going to get. But Amanda's annoyance in this case produces forgotten glimpses of photographs, anchors to a past when there's no more future, and Lisey revisits the past, taking us with her. We see the defining moments of lives: we see Scott at his craziest, and at his most vulnerable; we see Lisey and Scott through the bitter year of life in Germany, when they were cut off from the community that they subconsciously relied on. There's very little of the romantic in these glimpses — but King's never been big on that, and there's still a sense of warmth that suffuses even the bitter memories: this is a couple who struggled, and grew, and pulled each other out of oblivion. Literally.

But Lisey's sisters, in the present, are there to remind us of how complicated any love — any long association — is. In particular, Amanda, kin to Scott in darker ways, serves as both an anchor and a crutch to Lisey when one of Scott's crazy fans begins to pay visits.

If there's one weakness in the book, for me, it's the advent of Crazy Stalker Guy. Because I was already invested in the characters and the relationships I cared about, I almost resented the wordage given to him, and I think the book would have been just as strong without his presence as a plot device.

People who dislike the King

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approach to writing about being a famous writer will probably be annoyed by this book because so much of the life of Lisey and Scott Landon was informed by what Scott did. There's nothing new in that, and I didn't find it offensive or irritating.

But I found Lisey and Scott, and Lisey and Amanda, engrossing — I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this book, all quibbles aside.

Guy Gavriel Kay has spent so much of his writing life examining history and returning it to his readers, in fantasies designed to draw out and examine key themes, that this book seems like a departure: It's set in contemporary Provence, with contemporary characters, in particular the well-known, award-winning photographer Edward Marriner and his team of assistants: the terrifyingly well-organized Melanie, and the very bright and rather funny Steve and Greg. They have come together to capture some essential part of Provence's history for a new book.

Edward's son, Ned, is at the upper end of adolescence, and has come along for the ride, bringing with him cell phones, iPods, and a bit of attitude. His mother, Meghan, is away in the Sudan, taking her medical expertise to people who are far from able to afford it, and very much in need of it.

While scouting one of the more unusual buildings in Provence for possible shooting locations for his father, Ned has the good fortune to meet Kate, a girl his age — and he has the questionable fortune to meet a man who is a good deal older and a lot less friendly. Both of these people have parts to play, because while Ned is casually glancing at the accumulation of hundreds of years of history in the Saint-Sauveur Cathedral, history of a type is looking back at him.

And it starts with a bald, lithe stranger, and a statue of the Queen of Sheba. The stranger, Phelan, because he slipped unseen past two chatty teenagers into the depths of the tunnels beneath the Cathedral, and the Queen of Sheba because when Ned sees her, he *knows* she's not the Queen of Sheba, tourist guides notwithstanding. Here is Kay's description of the statue, through Ned's eyes:

> She had been *made* this way, barely carved into the stone, the features less sharply defined, meant to fade, to leave, like something lost from the beginning.

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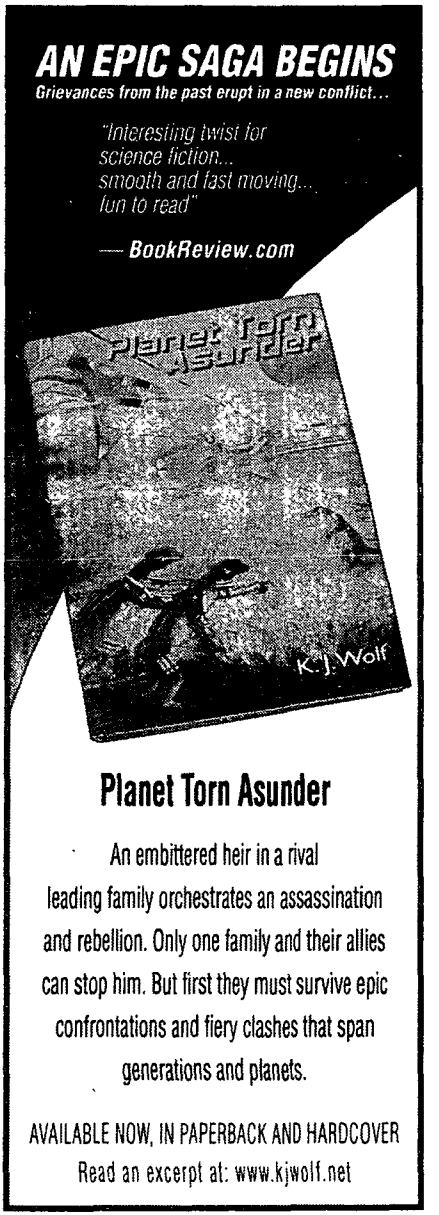
The paragraph is significant because, in many ways, it encapsulates my experience of reading Kay's work — that the sense of loss experienced when his world slips away, and his tale is told, will be profound, but the beauty of the experience is worth that loss, is perhaps more intense because it's coming.

There's a chattiness and a friendliness to this book that's immediately accessible (for instance, Ned does something very funny with ringtones), but as Kay introduces a second strange man into Ned's life — Cadell, a man in almost all ways different from the first — there is also a growing sense of old magic and old stories, both unfinished.

Phelan and Cadell are hunting in the depths of history for sight of Ysabel, the woman they both love, and have loved, for many lifetimes. To both of them, Ned isn't and shouldn't be part of the story — but when Ned calls Greg for an emergency ride, and Melanie shows up instead, all of the expedition finds itself thrown into the chaos of a love triangle that has been reborn, time and again, starting and ending in reunion and in loss.

Guy Gavriel Kay has always played along the edges of memory,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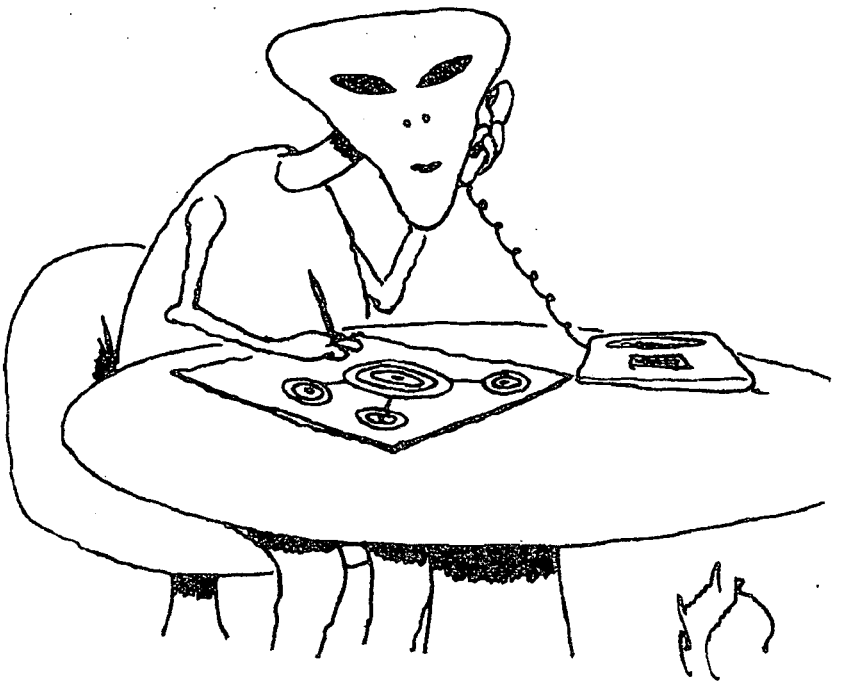
elegy, and romantic love. Here, in contemporary Provence, the land remembers what happened; the light remembers. The loss of obvious fantasy tropes doesn't dim the play of people who are in no way contemporary. History isn't hidden in the pages of almost mythic fantasy, and it certainly isn't absent — it's everywhere Ned walks.

But if there is power in old stories — and there always is — there is power in new stories, as well. In Ned, who slowly works his way toward a dim understanding of what Phelan and Cadell face, crossing their paths time and again in his fumbling attempts to save Melanie before she's lost to our world, and in the process, providing closure.

Guy Gavriel Kay's books always move me to tears. This novel is no exception, and I think readers who had some difficulty with *The Last Light of the Sun* will be happier with *Ysabel*. ☙



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Charlie Finlay notes that although this new story is in part about an engagement gone wrong, his own life has taken a happier turn: his recent engagement to Rae Carson recently ended happily in marriage.

"An Eye for an Eye" began with the first sentence, which was written as an example during a workshop discussion of first lines. After Catherine Morrison dared him to write the rest of the story, Mr. Finlay obliged with a story that might be classified as science fiction noir.

An Eye for an Eye

By Charles Coleman Finlay

SO WE'RE SITTING AT A TABLE in a Starbucks, and the beefy guy in the Hawaiian shirt says to me, "Yeah, after the colostomy, I had them put an eyeball in my anus — seemed like a good idea at the time."

I think about saying, "Why, 'cause you wanted hindsight?"

But because I don't know him or his sense of humor, but mostly because I really need the job, whatever the job is, what I end up doing is taking a long sip of coffee, then saying, "So how'd that work out?"

"Not so well, you know!" He's surprisingly intense about it, so I slouch forward and rub the stubble on my chin as though I care. Here I am, wearing serious bling, a hand-crafted jewel-covered globe on a chain around my neck, best thing I own, worth a small fortune. The last client I dealt with, some lawyer, made a big deal about it, had all kinds of questions. Now it's this guy, who's wearing an ugly shirt and telling me about the eyeball in his ass. And *I* have to take *him* seriously.

"See," he's saying, "I figured I could stick my ass in my windshield and drive down the highway mooning people."

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I decide I don't care so much whether this guy ends up being my client or not, because, hey, he's whack. So I say, "See anything worth seeing?"

He laughs. "It didn't work out. The optical nerve they ran up my anus to my spine was more like telegraph wire than DSL. I couldn't see shit — I know! Don't say it. But no depth perception, not much color, just a lot of blurry movement. I tried to drive like this, holding the steering wheel between my legs." He leans over out of his seat, and reaches down between his legs, miming the action. "Ran off the road on the first curve. Sprained my neck, was lucky I didn't roll the car. You ever have the mocha frappuccino?"

He's drinking some deluxe frothy thing full of sugar and topped with whipped cream. It must take a college degree to prepare it because the girl behind the counter was telling us about her years as an English major for the three hours it took her to fix the drink. Me, I have my coffee plain. I used to joke that I liked my coffee like I liked my women — strong, hot, and black. But the truth is, I just like it cheap and easy. Which is how I like my women these days too. But it's better if I don't think much about that.

What I answer is, "No."

He takes the lid off to slurp it, and says, "It's like slushie heaven."

"What happened to the eyeball?" I ask, 'cause I gotta know.

"I had it removed when they grew the new intestine and took off the colostomy. Like I said, not my best idea ever. So are you interested or not? In the job?"

"What job?" I say. "We haven't talked about anything except your surgeries."

He says, "Oh, I'm sorry. Guess I'm not sure how this is supposed to work. But what I mentioned in my e-mail. I was engaged to be married and it turned out badly, now I want to get my jewels back."

"Jewels?" I ask. Perking up some.

He shifts in his seat. The animated parrots on his Hawaiian shirt flutter nervously to new branches. "Yeah."

Because I'm impatient and want to know what I'm going after, I say, "Like your grandmother's diamonds? What?"

"No," he says. "They're my family jewels."

I must stare at him like I'm stupid or something, because he tilts his

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head back and holds up his chunky hands in open supplication, and finally I say, "What?"

With a look of exasperation, he leans forward and whispers. "My testicles. She's got my testicles."

"Dude," I say, reaching down to check my own package and make sure it's intact. "Whoa."

Tilting his chair back, with a glance at the girl who made our drinks, he says, "I gave them to her for an engagement present. She said she wanted them because she wanted kids and all that. You know, I was in love, I thought, hey, kids, cool. But after we broke it off she wouldn't give them back."

And I know if he's telling the truth, I'm in. I'm thinking, if he's telling the truth I'm crazy if I'm not in.

Of course, he's not telling the whole truth. No one ever does. But is he telling enough truth to make it worth my while to get involved? That's what I need to find out.

YOU HAVE TO understand that I got into burglary the way some women get into prostitution. First I did it for fun, then I did it for some friends, now I do it for money.

That's what I tell myself anyways. It's my way up.

Maybe I should tell you about it, so you can understand why I do what I do. When I do it later.

It started out a few years ago. I had a roommate who had a drug habit. He was a Have, like the guy I was meeting here in the Starbucks, and I was — am — a Have-not. I was born a borderline Have, my mom being a corporate lawyer and all, but when she divorced my dad for her trophy husband, Corwin, about the time I started middle school, Dad and I plummeted pretty quickly into Have-not territory. I've been trying to climb my way out ever since.

So my roommate, like I said, turns out he was a gasm addict, a dryhead, hooked on moneyshots, those inhalers that make a guy have orgasms. I tried that stuff once, but let's face it, it doesn't compare to the real thing, not least because where I live you can get the real thing cheaper.

Anyway, I found out roomie had a habit when he started pawning my

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stuff to make his dealer rich. I gave him one day to move out, which he did. When I came home from work, he had moved out all right — and taken all my stuff with him.

I couldn't afford the rates the contract cops charge these days. Oh, sure, I could've taken him to small claims court for nothing, but then I didn't really want to wait until we were scheduled for our TV slot to get satisfaction. That can take months. Instead I found out where he moved, broke in, and stole my stuff back. Since he'd already sold some of it, I had to visit him several more times, over six months and a couple addresses, until the checkbook balanced out.

The last time I robbed him, it was just for the thrill. The freak had gone straight, borrowed money from his folks, put up cameras and bought a guard fearit, one of those genetically engineered ferret hybrids smalltime dope dealers keep around. But sneaky low-tech beats stupid high-tech. I spraypainted the cameras and drugged the fearit with Nyquil-marinated chicken livers, broke in and took what I wanted. Then nature called at an opportune moment, so I left a king-size dump in the middle of his queen-size bed, wiped my ass on his pillowcases, and called it even.

I left off that last part when I told my friend Diane about it. Which ended up being lucky, because she'd just found out her boyfriend Joe was cheating on her. Diane was, is, a Euro-Chinese kickboxing braniac, with big dark eyes and great taste in jewelry. It wasn't like her to get all emotional, but she'd been in love with Joe and had her life planned out right down to the brood of children. That was going to be her whole life. So she took it pretty hard, especially when Joe kept a bunch of things that mattered to her, including her earpod with maybe her ten thousand favorite songs on it, her collection of Generation Mutant action figures, and the celery-colored Fiestaware.

There we were, drinking away her sorrow, and she started telling me how Joe ruined her world, how he took something away from her she could never have replaced. She was cold-hearted that night, swearing she'd have him killed. I said she didn't need to go that far to get her stuff back. I could do it for her. Trying to impress her, be the nice guy rebound after that jerk. She took me up on it.

I got her most of her stuff back, but it wasn't enough to make her happy and I didn't get to be the rebound. Truth is, she's always been

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cold-hearted since that time. Joe died in a motorcycle accident a couple months later, casting a weird pall over the whole thing. She called me up to take her to the funeral, said I was the only one who could understand her true feelings about him. She finished law school after that, found a job at a big criminal firm, and crossed the border into Have-land. And that was that.

I crossed the border into Crooksville. My plan was to do a few big jobs, salt away the money, and start over. Finish college, go to law school maybe, something like that. Only the jobs were never big enough to give me that chance, even though I keep trying to move up into the big leagues.

Diane did me a favor here and there, telling some of her more discreet colleagues about my special talents. If their clients didn't have enough money for legal fees to resolve property disputes, they referred their clients to me. Over the past couple years, I've built up a steady business. It's a better gig than smash-and-grabs. I get some inside tip, a key or passcode, plus the people who are robbed are usually not eager to involve the cops. I make way more than I could on my own.

It was one of Diane's sleazier friends who contacted me about the beefy guy sitting across from me in Starbuck's. In an odd way, everything I have now I owe to Diane.

I try not to think about the fact that I don't have what I really wanted.

What I say next to the guy in the Hawaiian shirt is, "Wow. That took some balls for her to do."

He frowns at me like he's already heard all those jokes, which probably he has, so I jump to the next question.

"Why not just take her to court?"

After another drink of frothy coffee, he leans forward and says, "Look, I depend on a trust fund and my mother administers it like a fucking food stamp program. She tolerates a lot but if she ever found out that I lost all of her future grandchildren, she'd go off like a missile."

"I'll do it," I tell him.

Because I'm in the moment I hear him say "trust fund." I name a price that's twice my usual fee and he says yes so fast I figure I'd lowballed him.

But that's what happens when you move up into the next league. You make a few mistakes, and you learn.

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I won't sign any affidavits for accuracy, but here's the story he told me, the way he told it to me, only with the boring stuff edited out.

Said his name was Casto Beckett, and waited for a response like that was supposed to mean something to me. Okay, so later I looked it up, and he's one of the Becketts who own all the rental properties and retail space and the old nostalgia malls they have out by the exurbs. At the time, I had no idea who he was and just waved him on impatiently. He wandered a lot, talking about boarding school, hospitals, his controlling mother. Said he spent a lot of time and money on "business projects" — by which I gather he meant travel, clubs, and drugs — before his mother clamped down on him.

His ex-fiancée's name is Patrina Solove. They met at a club or a party, somewhere on the scene, he can't remember. But she was an insecure, evil, controlling bitch just like his mother, which is why he fell for her so hard according to his therapist. He'd been in a self-destructive phase then — he didn't do anything harder than the mocha frappuccino these days, honest — and he'd made a lot of bad decisions. One of them was buying Ms. Solove an engagement ring with a five carat diamond in it.

Interjection here by me, saying I'd never seen a five carat diamond, and him impatiently saying it was big enough it could choke a dog, and maybe she'd choke on it. But he didn't care anymore. That wasn't the point.

Being she was from a family similar to his, only construction and data infrastructure — this time I nodded like I knew the name — the two of them got lawyers involved and drew up prenups before they even told their parents or let word leak to the gossip-web. She was set on having children, so as a condition of the engagement she got possession of his testicles.

"I've been in and out of hospitals," he says, stroking the patchy beard on his chin, "so I figured what the hell, no big deal, and went and had it done."

"And then the relationship went bad?" I prompt.

"Like takeout you forget in the backseat on a hot day."

More rambling here, but the short version is the woman's crazy, the kind who says one thing and does another, wants control of every facet of his life, always has to know where he's been, who he's been with, like she hasn't got his balls already and that isn't enough.

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"She's totally freaked," he says. "She had my testicles dolled up like those easter eggs."

"The plastic kind?" I ask, thinking about my grandma putting quarters and hard candy in those pastel eggshells and hiding them in her garden.

"No, like the kind they have in museums. All gold and shit."

"Fabergé eggs?"

"Yeah, I don't know, something like that," he says, and it's another one of the injustices of the world that I know this and he doesn't. "She keeps the pair of them on a shelf in her living room, or did when we were still talking to each other. Last time we talked, she told me I'd never get them from her, and she had her security guy, Sean, throw me out of the house. I went into rehab after that...."

More rambling here, but the way it ends up is he gives me her addresses, everything he knows about her, and transfers a few token bucks into one of my bank accounts as a deposit. I have it set up so it looks like he bought something from me on eBuy, so we can explain it away if it ever gets traced.

And that's how we become business partners.

Truth is, I feel a little bit of sympathy for Beckett. Not that I lost my balls or anything, but I had exactly one piece of bodmod done and it was for Diane.

I figured I'd never have a real chance with her, being short as I was, a couple inches shorter than her anyway, and her going for tall guys. So I cleaned out my dad's bank accounts, what he had left, all for his retirement, and spent it getting four inches added to my legs. Pretty tame stuff, compared to what people do these days. Hurt like hell. Hell, it still hurts sometimes, and I've never quite gotten used to my new height. Center of balance is all off and shit.

It was the last time I ever spoke to my dad. Once he quit calling me up and cussing me out, that is. Served him right for getting fat and screwing things up with mom.

Diane didn't even notice. When I saw her after the surgery, she paused for a second, looking up into my face instead of down, then kept on talking and didn't say a word about it.

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There's no way for me to get back my money or give back the pain. So I have to live without the one and with the other. But it's no big deal anymore.

Beckett's job looks it will be a big one, so I break it down into parts. Problem with that is the more parts there are, the more parts there are to go wrong. First part, the hardest part, is finding out where she has his balls. I can't steal them if I can't find them.

But the information he gave me is good. His ex lives in one of those old gated communities on the cliffs along the river, the kind where they took down the gates a long time ago and now just have these big decorative entryways. It's quaint, if twenty thousand square feet with a six-car garage can be called quaint.

I put on a shirt with a nametag — "Elizabeth," which cracks me up — and a ballcap, and carry around a meter-reader that I stole from a van that was unlocked after I busted out the window and reached in to flip the handle. That's the thing about Have neighborhoods — the Have-nots that make them run are pretty much invisible. Look like you're there doing a job that nobody who lives there would ever be caught dead doing and they never give you a second glance.

The first floor of her house is all windows and no window coverings, in order to show off her possessions to the neighbors. The security systems in these houses, with their live-in guards, make hiding stuff superfluous anyway. Walking by, I see a pair of golden somethings sitting on a shelf in the living room like a pair of fancy Hummel figurines. "Humpty," I mumble, "If that's you and Dumpty, don't fall before I get there, okay?"

I know it's not all going to be this easy. When I see somebody walking around inside, I take the next step on impulse and go knock on the door. I'm looking down at the meter, clicking buttons, when the door opens.

"Yeah?" the guy says.

Whatever I was going to say, I forget it for a second when I see his face. He's obviously one of those old ultimate-fighting guys. His nose has been made flat so it can't be broken, flaps hang down over his ears, and he's got thick leathery pads on his jaws like protective headgear. Makes him look like a bulldog. For a second, I'm ready to ask him if he wants to sniff my ass to make sure I'm okay.

Instead, what I say is, "Says here the meter's behind the garage. Didn't see it there. Maybe it's down in the basement?"

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I look up and meet his eyes challengingly, but bored. Like a guy who gets paid by the hour and has seen it all before, including JoJo the dog-faced houseboy. Then I look past him, like I'm trying to find the meter on the wall, like he's not even there, that's how bored I am, how much I want to get my job done and move on.

"I dunno," he says, starting to be angry, then catching the name on my shirt and wondering if he should make something of it. "Gotta be outside, 'cause we been here three years and nobody ever knocked on the door 'bout it before."

"So show me where it is then."

We troop around the house, and he leads me toward the garage where I said it should be, but as we walk around the side of the house I spot it behind the spirea bushes, and tell him thanks for the help while I'm typing numbers into my meter, then walk off to the next house without looking back. Because I already saw exactly what I needed to see: yes, those were the eggs sitting right there on a shelf by the windows. It's the ego thing, gets in the way. People who steal stuff, they always show off the bling and it catches up with them. Trust me, I know. Those two golden eggs gotta be the ones I'm looking for, look like Fabergé, just like Beckett described them.

Knowing where they are doesn't make me any happier, even though finding them was easy. First off, she's got JoJo the security guy living in the house. Maybe she lets him out in the yard to shit, but I'm betting he doesn't go much farther than that. Second, the windows are all shatter-proof glass and hooked up to an alarm system. So, even if I dodge her guard dog, I can't do a smash-and-grab, because the windows won't smash and if they did the cops'd be on me even before I could grab. The extra bonuses they pay cops in these neighborhoods are quaint too — private industry at its best.

I sit on that for a couple weeks, making plans and discarding them, watching the neighborhood. In the end, because I'm dead broke and need the payday fast, I decide to try the invisibility trick again. I see work vans bringing Have-nots from the suburb apartment complexes into the neighborhood to work — landscapers, maids, carpet-cleaners. A regular one-stop shop, every Wednesday, contracted out by the homeowners association. There's one supervisor who walks around between several houses all subscribed to the same service.

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Dressed up in drab colors, a little dirty, and carrying a keypad, I wait until the supervisor has hit Beckett's ex's house already and is down at the other end of the block in the cul-de-sac. The door to the ex's house is open while the vacuum guys — all bonded and carrying headcams — shoot through the rooms. JoJo the dog-faced bodyguard is out back in his doghouse with his head under his food bowl hiding from the sound. I walk in studying my keypad and when I notice nobody noticing me, I scoop the eggs into a pocket I've got hidden in the front of my work shirt. Usually I look around and filch a little something for myself on jobs like this one, but there's really no time and I don't want to end up on any of the headcams. I notice, however, some blown-glass unicorn sitting on the shelf beneath the eggs — I pick it up, snap its neck, and lay it down. Then I waltz out.

I stop on the front steps, tapping furiously into my keypad. One of the lawncare guys looks up from where he's raking mulch into the bushes and I say, "We're behind schedule. Pick it up or you won't be home in time for dinner."

Guy mutters a curse word or two, but makes a big show of putting his back into the mulch-spreading. I hardly even see it because I'm walking down the street, shedding my hat, tearing the nametag off my shirt. Then I'm in the car, and out through the gates.

The two eggs weigh more than I expected. I don't know how much sperm weighs, but I don't worry about it. I figure Beckett will plug them back in, they'll go back to work, and that's that.

In the end, it's one of the easiest jobs I've ever done.

AT HOME, I spend the whole evening studying these eggs. They're gorgeous — heavy, gold-enameled spheres, one decorated with dancing cabana boys or whatever they're called, the other with naked nymphs, look like porn stars, all in silver filigree and ornamented with tiny gems. I figure even if it's all fake, it's still worth a bundle.

It reminds me of the gold globe I was wearing when I went to meet Beckett. I go back to my bedroom and pull it out of my sock drawer and hold it up to the light. It's a tiny world on a gold chain, a present from Diane to Joe. It had been on the list of things she wanted back from him.

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Had been on the top of the list, actually. But since it had been a gift, I figured she didn't really have a right to it and I kept it for myself. A little something for ignoring the surgery I went through to be taller for her. Maybe I even planned to return it once she dated me, only then she never did.

The world twirls at the end of the chain, throwing reflections off the silver surface between the porcelain-enamel continents. It's elegant and looks like it should screw in half to hide something inside, but I've never been able to take it apart and after Diane moved on, I lost interest in trying. It sat in a drawer for a couple years until I needed to impress people with money.

I lay it on the table, coiling the chain around it like a nest, and go back to the eggs. The read-sockets are hidden underneath. I try plugging in my computers but it's security locked, and all I get are tiny flashing red lights that go away when I unplug. I figure if there's any kind of tracer in them that I've activated, it's best to turn them over to Beckett. So I call him and tell him we need to meet right away.

Beckett is grinning and chuckling when I hand the eggs to him at an Opie's Family Restaurant. We're in the booth at the end of the counter that's lined by barber chairs — they look great but they're not so comfortable to sit in, so they stay empty most of the time.

"You're amazing," he says, drinking a big malted shake. "How'd you do it?"

I tell him it's a professional secret and ask him to show me the cash. I like cash because it's harder to trace. He hands over a duffle. I drop it beside me on the seat and count the money out under the table. When I'm satisfied it's all there, I say, "It's been a pleasure doing business with you. Keep me in mind for any future needs you may have."

He chuckles again, like this is the greatest thing ever, and I'm thinking that Haves are different than the rest of us, because they have more money. But now I've got a piece of that for myself. "How you gonna spend that?" he says, grinning.

Since it's none of his business, I smile and say, "Dunno. I'll come up with something."

He laughs and tells me not to spend it all in one place, then we shake hands, promise to keep in touch, part friends.

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I hate that downhome Opie crap, so I go through a drive-through Thai King to get some tom ka gai on the way back to my place. I pay them with one of the small bills Beckett gave me.

Alarms go off as soon as it hits the cash drawer. The money is fake. Counterfeit. The lady in the food window is old as my grandmother, and she's staring at me with that old lady mixture of disappointment and contempt while the tire spikes pop up in front and back of my car.

I lean my head forward against the steering wheel to wait for the private cops to show up. I'm hoping they take a while so I can figure out how to get even with Beckett.

Turns out, I get out of the drive-through situation by pretending to be stupid. Way I feel right then, there's not a lot of pretending involved. The money isn't marked or tied to any other crime. When I hear that, I feed them some bull about getting it for change at a Chopstick Charlie's cross-town. While they badmouth their competitors, I dig up enough clean cash from my pocket to pay Thai King again for the meal. I also talk to the manager and pay upfront for the drop-in call from the coptractors. Of course, they keep the counterfeit bill. We all know one of them is going to spend it somewhere else, which is how the stuff stays in circulation. Everybody's happy. Even the grandma in the pickup window favors me with a complimentary smile and everything is forgiven.

By the time it's over, I'm not as mad at Beckett either. Thing is, I realize how lucky I am to get caught spending the counterfeit for small change. If I dropped a roll of it at a dealer for a new car or something, they'd have to cart me off to jail. So the big question is, is it all fake, or was that just one bad bill? Is it an accident, or have I been set up?

I'm hoping it's the former, because once I've calmed down I still want to like Beckett. It's hardly the first time I've been bagged with a bad bill. Everyone gets one now and then.

When I get home, I check out the rest of the finder's fee in the bag.

It's all fake.

Every bill.

I know, because after a few random ones turn out fake, I get methodical, like a freaking bank teller, and check every bill.

Which means Beckett is fake too. He's fooled me better than I thought.

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I'm sitting here, on my futon, planning ways to get even with him, trying to figure out how I'm going to pay my bills, when the phone rings. I don't even bother to see who it is before I answer.

"Yeah, what?" is what I say.

"Still the charmer, I see," says a voice on the other end that I don't quite recognize anymore and also can never forget. When I'm completely silent, she says, "Hey, this is Diane. You still in your old line of work?"

"No," I say. "I retired recently. Apparently I'm too stupid to do it anymore." But what I'm thinking is, Diane? What the hell? I can't really concentrate on anything else.

"Well, get back into it. I need a serious favor and I can't turn to anyone but you to do it."

And I'm thinking, I can't possibly rip my heart out and leave it on your doorstep again because I've already done that once, and it was one time too many. "What is it?"

"A friend of mine had something incredibly valuable stolen. She needs somebody she can trust completely to get it back again."

"Look, Diane, I don't really do that anymore."

"This is a special situation," she says. "Some asshole stole her ovaries."

I shut up. I already know the next line before she says it.

"She had them stored for safekeeping in a couple of jeweled eggs, like Fabergé — "

"And her name's Patrina Solove."

That shuts her up. And gives me time to think.

Of course they were eggs. Beckett lied to me about the whole thing. If they'd been his testicles, they'd have been a couple golden nuts. He played me twice.

"How'd you know that?" she asks finally.

"Word gets around."

"It gets around fast then! I knew you were the right person to call. You know who has them?"

"Maybe," I say, thinking I don't really know much about Beckett at all, and whether he even is who he said he was. I'm thinking this whole thing is seriously screwed up and I'm better off if I don't have anything to do with it. What I want to say to her is, hey, listen, there's not enough

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money in the world to pay me to be part of this mess. But she gets tired of waiting for me to speak.

"That's fantastic," she says. "Look, if you do this as a favor for me, I'd be very grateful."

"I don't know, Diane. I'm out of that line of work. I'm back in school, trying to finish my degree."

"That's great. God, you've got so much determination."

"I've got my mom's role model to follow," I say. "She worked really hard all her life. I'm just trying to, you know, do something I can be proud of." I don't even think of it as a lie, when I'm saying it to her. I believe it. It's the chance I should have had, the chance I still deserve to have.

"That's really great," she says. "Look, if you've changed and you don't do that stuff anymore, I understand that completely."

"I didn't say that, exactly."

"It's just that it would mean a lot to me. For my friend's sake. That's something this guy took from her that can't ever be replaced. It's like taking her whole world away. Do you have any idea how that feels?"

"Why would she do something like that anyway?" I ask, trying to change the subject away from me and Diane, because I don't want to think about us, and about all the stuff I deserve that I don't have.

"I know," she says. "It's a terrible idea because something just like this can happen. I told her it was a bad idea, but she wouldn't listen. She's completely devastated. Are you sure you can't do anything to help her?"

"I don't know. Maybe I could talk to her." I don't know what makes me say that, but as soon as I do, Diane's all over it.

"Oh, I knew I could count on you. Maybe after you talk to her, we could get together for dinner or something. Catch up on old times."

"What old times are those," I mumble, frowning at the bitterness I hear in my own voice.

But she says, "No, I should've done it a long time ago. I owe you payback. More than you know."

"No problem, Diane," I hear myself blurting out loud enough for her to hear. "Anything you ever need from me, you know all you have to do is ask."

After that we trade a couple pleasantries and she sets up a meeting with her friend Patrina right there while I'm waiting on the phone, and then we promise to talk to each other soon, and that's that.

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I'm totally over Diane, okay. But like she said, she owes me and maybe finally I'll get to collect. If I can get even at the same time with Beckett for cheating me, even better.

GET THIS: Beckett wanted to meet at Starbuck's; his ex takes me out to lunch at Eleni's. Eleni's is the best restaurant in town, a place where you have to book reservations a month in advance. I meet Patrina there the *next* day.

When I arrive, the maître d' looks me over like I'm a bum off the street, until I tell him who I'm having lunch with, and then the whole staff suddenly treats me like I'm the guest of royalty, which tells me Patrina's a big spender, because in this part of the city, money is king.

They take me over to the table where she's already sitting and I can see why Beckett was willing to give up his testicles.

Not that she's my type. But she's the kind of almost-anorexic brunette that a lot of guys go for, looks like she lives on a diet of coffee, cigarettes, and pills. And that's fine, because she's built like a Jaguar convertible, all muscle and lean curves, everything waxed to a high gloss. She's wearing rainforest-green lip gloss, leaf-pattern eyeshadow, and a dark dress with a sheen on it like dew. Her mouth is a bit too wide for her face, which makes it just wide enough.

"Please sit down, I'm so glad to see you," she says, waving me into the seat and launching into a nervous account of the restaurant's specials, more like she waited tables than sat at them. We get interrupted once by a call to her cell phone and a second time when she remembers she needs to make a quick call. When we finally get waited on, I order the tofu curry, just because I think meat will upset her, and I smile a lot while she sips her wine and gives the preternaturally androgynous waitperson three sets of conflicting instructions.

When she finally settles down, I say, "So you're a friend of Diane's?"

She shrugs it off and then shoots right into a story about how they met at this party on one of the riverboats, and it turns out her best friend knew Diane's boss, and they started talking and became best friends, after which she adds a couple anecdotes about seeing Diane at a wedding and calling her another time for help with the police — a complete misunderstanding,

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but Diane knows how to talk to people so they do *stuff*, plus she's discreet, and anyway, that was all water burning the bridge, and then she laughs and says or whatever that phrase is, that's what I mean, and don't you and Diane go way back too?

"We've known each other a few years," I admit. "So what's your problem, exactly?"

"Didn't she tell you?" At this point I notice that her makeup is covering some possibly bad surgery around her mouth. She's playing with it the same way Beckett played with his chin, only there's a tiny bump of a scar in the divot under her nose. Maybe it's a mole. Either way, she flicks her finger over and over it when she gets nervous.

"Yes, she did," I say. "But professionally, I figure it's better to hear the whole story from you so I have all the facts straight."

"Well, there's not too much to say," she says, leaning forward across the table to whisper to me, giving me a good look at the cylinders in her engine when she does it. "I had my ovaries removed, you know, for safekeeping, so they wouldn't be exposed to anything that might damage them. It's really the best birth control there is, you know. I had them stored in some replica Fabergé eggs, the kind made by Seibert's — have you ever seen any of them?"

I have, in fact, just recently. But I give a shake of my head for a no, and she goes into a long description that doesn't really do them justice, adding that I ought to see her friend Christiana's, gorgeous, a real work of art, ought to be in a museum, although Jazmin has hers in a Betty Boop doll, which is kind of cute too, and Sigourney keeps hers in a golf ball — they can store them in something that small but it costs a lot more — even though they kicked her off the LPGA for cheating. She tells me a lot about how the storage process works, and how they can be ruined without regular maintenance, but I don't care much, so I don't listen.

She's as impatient as she is talkative, and she stops the waitperson several times to check on the status of our meal.

During one of these interruptions, I get impatient too and ask her what happened to her eggs.

"Cas stole them — he told me he would."

"Who's Cas?" I ask, even though I can safely guess that Cas is Casto

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Beckett, my previous employer. She tells me his full name and I feel glad to have gotten one thing right.

"It's kind of embarrassing," she goes on saying and there's a flinch in her eyes, and at that point I can see her more as my type. For all her polished exterior, she's vulnerable. "I did some crazy things," she says. "I got engaged to him, even drew up the prenups. That's when I promised him my eggs — before I knew what he wanted to do with them! This was back when I was still running with the oddbod addicts."

She says the last with a bit of a blush, and while I want to know what he wanted her eggs for, I don't know anything about oddbod addicts and I say so.

"It's a subculture thing, mostly about sex. You go into a spa at the beginning of the week and they give you any mod you want. End of the week, they turn you back to normal, whatever normal is for you. Anyway, the one we met at was just outside Naples — "

"Italy?" I ask, getting a quick vision of tracking this down across the ocean like a real jewel thief. I ought to be eating in restaurants like this every day, traveling to places like Italy too.

But she says, "No — Naples, Florida. There's a scene there — it's too many drugs for me, all supposedly painkillers 'for the surgery.'" She makes the little quote-marks gesture with her fingers, and I wait for a jab of her nail to signal the period but it's not coming.

"Help me out a little more, paint a picture for me," I say, licking my lips, and leaning forward on my elbows just as the waitthing arrives with our plates. There's a bit of a delay while the three of us talk about the food and the waitperson grates a dusting of parmesan over Patrina's dry greens.

"Cas liked to have an extra" — she lifts her eyebrows, glances around, and mimes a penis with her hands: modesty incarnate, that's this girl — "attached to his chin."

I try not to spit out my mouthful of tofu. I suddenly have a whole different memory of that patchy spot on his chin and him rubbing it. And I'm automatically thinking about the little bump on her upper lip too.

"It was kind of fun," she says. "You can imagine what he did with it. You know, not all the stuff the mod addicts do is *wrong*. It can be okay if you're not obsessed with it. So, yeah, I wanted to experiment with that kind of thing, but then I got sucked into the scene for a while. Cas is a total

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addict though! He blew through his whole fortune for weekend after weekend of it. I saw pictures," she says, and then she describes graphically some of the modifications he had and I lose most of my appetite. Meanwhile I'm wondering what kinds of oddmod she had done at the spas. I must be staring at her too intently because she stops talking suddenly and starts rubbing that little bump above her lip until she relaxes again.

"We all make mistakes," I say, trying not to make one here myself. "So let's assume Beckett has your eggs now. Why not go after them with cops and lawyers?"

"It'll take too long," she says. "He was totally in love with me, obsessed. He always said one of me would never be enough. I think he has a plan to clone a whole bunch of me to be like his sex slaves. He kept talking about having a harem of love, a harem of Solove, crap like that." She shudders, her wide mouth pressed into a tight green line. "He wanted to have, like, massive oddbod done and then have a harem of me please all of him at once. It creeps me out just thinking about it."

I mumble something sympathetic. I think about telling her that she can't be cloned with just her eggs, but if she doesn't know that, why should I correct her?

She's still talking. "Plus the whole thing's too embarrassing. You can imagine the effect on my grandmother if this got out in public. She'd have another heart attack. Diane told me you'd solved a problem for her once, not the same, but close enough. She said you'd take care of it quietly."

That's my cue to give her the sales pitch, with the price list, which I do. To her credit, she doesn't flinch at all, and she opens her wallet right there at the table and does a transfer to my account for the deposit. Normally, I prefer cash because it can't be traced to clients, but after my recent experience, I'm happy to take the transfer and let's face it, I need any cash I can get. And, money aside, the best part of this job will be getting back at Beckett for ripping me off.

"I'll need some help," I say, and I describe what I need — addresses, keycards, passcodes — the sort of work that makes my job easy. She says no problem and then gets distracted and sends off a text message on her phone, and we talk to the waitthing about the dessert menu and she can't possibly have a dessert but do I get to Eleni's often, and I don't, so she

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insists I try the raspberry custard, which is not really my thing at all, but I let her talk me into it.

Eventually she gets back on topic. "Cas called me to gloat, so I know he has the eggs, and I know where he has them. But we need to act fast before he flies out of town to one of the spas. There's dozens of them, and since I dropped out of the scene, I don't know them all anymore and I have no idea which one he's going to now." While I'm trying to find out more details about the spas, she stands and, smoothing her dress over her impossibly tight tummy, says, "Can you excuse me for a moment?"

Before I can give her an answer, she walks off toward the restrooms in back, pausing a moment to chat with one of the head servers, and I'm watching her, daydreaming about my good luck, about all the stuff I'm going to take from his apartment besides the eggs, when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

I look up and it's JoJo the dogfaced houseboy. He's a bit flushed, has got a faint smell of fight-sweat on him, like he's just been in one, or more like he's ready to start one.

"Hey, I recognize you," he says.

I admit my heart stops for a moment. The last guy I wanted to run into here is JoJo.

But then JoJo says, "So you're not doing the meter thing anymore? Good. That seems like a hell of a job."

I'm thinking can he be that stupid? But then I look at his face, and with the evidence of how stupid he really is staring back at me, I decide to play it straight. "Yeah, I do this other stuff on the side, for an old friend, happens to be a friend of Patrina too. Weird how that works out, huh?"

He says, "No kidding."

I notice his sweat again, and figure maybe it's heavy exercise for him to put two thoughts together, and he must be just about worn out by now. "So is there something — ?"

"Patrina asked me to bring you these," he says, and he starts shoving things into my jacket pocket. "Here's the address for her ex-fiancé's place, a keycard to his building that she didn't give back when they broke up, and here's the passcode to his place."

I'm jumpy because I didn't expect to see JoJo here and also because I don't like doing certain kinds of business in public. But JoJo knows his

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stuff, because he's using his body to block the view from nearby tables, and I tell myself the rules are different when you move up to the big leagues. When I don't get this kind of stuff from my clients, the jobs are so much harder. This one is going to be easy and I can concentrate on ripping off Beckett for everything he's worth.

I make some small talk with JoJo, but it ends with me telling him thanks, and he says no problem. While I'm looking around, wondering where Patrina's gone, he excuses himself and leaves. About that same moment, our androgynous waitperson brings the bill and asks how I'd like to pay it.

Pisses me off. Typical Have attitude, probably how they get to be Haves. But since I've got Patrina's money in my account and I've got Beckett's counterfeit cash at home and I've got Diane waiting to see me when all this is done, I'm in a good mood overall, so I pay it. Although I leave a shitty tip.

BECKETT LIVES in an older apartment complex downtown, with minimal security. I've got nowhere else to go after lunch, so I sit outside for a while watching people come and go from the building until I decide to do a quick reconnoiter. His cardkey gets me in, and I go up to his landing and knock on his door, saying "Pizza! Hey, your pizza's here!" I stand away from the peephole and figure I can duck down the stairwell before he gets out the door if I hear it open.

When there's no answer, I try his passcode, just to see if it works. I slip on some latex gloves first, because I'm working, and it's just in case.

The door swings open and I see his dead body face down on the floor. He's naked like he just got out of the shower, and there's blood all around his head, and the back of his skull is smashed in like JoJo was hiding there waiting for him. The main thing I notice, and it freezes me in fascination for a moment, are all the faint scars on his body, odd shapes in odd places, for who knows what.

There's more to it though. I'm looking at the abuse his body has taken, self-inflicted and otherwise, and I realize that the rich aren't like the rest of us at all. They do whatever they want and get away with it.

The chime of the elevator out in the hallway scares me and I shut the

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door. While I hear the voices out in the hall, I do a quick look-around for the eggs, just out of habit. They're not here. Neither is anything else of value. He's got a third-rate home theater and fourth-rate furniture. It looks like anything he could pawn has already been pawned. Stepping over to his desk, I don't even see a laptop, just a stack of unopened bills, none more than a couple months old.

I know Patrina's played me too, but most lies contain a peppering of truth. I find myself standing next to Beckett's dead body, thinking that since there were two eggs, maybe the one with the dancing boys was his testicles and the one with the nymphs was her ovaries. Like it matters.

I'm shaking like I've had nothing but coffee for three days. Then a door shuts somewhere out in the hall, and the voices are gone, and I'm in a hurry to leave. Might be the first job I don't take anything with me on the way out. I'd wanted to get even with Beckett, but that seems kind of pointless now.

I should be getting rid of his counterfeit money first thing when I get home, but I find the funds that Patrina transferred to my account have been frozen. I haven't made any real cash in over a month and I've got bills of my own to pay so I hold onto the bad cash because I'm going to need to pass it.

Then I take a drink to calm my shakes, and a second drink when that doesn't work, and pretty soon I'm getting blind drunk so I can forget the sight of Beckett's body. I try to pack, because I know I need to go away for a while. There comes a point where I can barely stand up and I go hunting for the globe, the one that looks like Beckett's eggs. There's a thought in my head, that maybe it's the same kind of thing after all. I can't find it, but then I'm so gone I can't find my ass with both hands either and I pass out drunk soon after.

The cops come to pick me up around ten the next day.

I'm still sleeping when they start banging on the door and knock it open 'cause I'm too slow to answer. One of them has a nose like a Collie, makes me think of JoJo, and he starts sniffing around while I try to shake off the hangover fog and get them the hell out of my place.

They're polite about everything, but it's clear they've got warrants and probable cause and somebody who paid them enough money to make

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searching my place a priority. I'm hoping it's about some simple burglary, but when they start asking questions about Beckett and how long I've known him and what my business with him was, I know I'm screwed.

They turn up the counterfeit money. And blood on my shoe.

About that time they put the handcuffs on me and read me my rights. We all know it's a joke. The truth is we only have a right to the justice we can afford. And I'm bust.

I call Diane from jail, ask her for her help, and, thinking it will give her a reason to get involved, blurt out that I still have the world pendant she gave Joe.

She says, "It's too late for that."

That's when I realize, for the first time, what she kept in that necklace. I mean, no wonder she was angry, right. But I didn't know, and before I can say anything to her, tell her I'm sorry, I didn't know what it was, she hangs up.

Like I said, cold-hearted.

That's how I ended up here in this cell on death row. You know the story the prosecutor told in court. They said I'm a petty thief who went into partnership with Casto Beckett, who got himself in financial trouble and wanted to move some counterfeit money to get out. I killed him and took the money. Then I used his stolen credit card to make a huge transfer to my own account from the restaurant, where I was trying to blackmail Patrina Solove before her bodyguard rescued her.

I'm telling you the real story, the whole thing, even the stuff I did wrong, because you're here to help me. Right? They talk about taking an eye for an eye, that's justice. Well, I know I did some wrong things, and I'm sorry for them. But I didn't do the murder they're going to kill me for.

Listen, talk to Diane for me — she's got to be behind all this. There was just no way to know her ovaries were in that globe. Tell her how sorry I am, tell her I didn't mean to ruin them. She can't blame me for that, you have to tell her.

Dude! Don't laugh — I could end up dying!

Yeah, what do you mean I didn't need an eyeball in my ass to see that coming?

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Mélanie Fazi is a French writer and translator who lives in Paris, near the Bastille. Her books include Serpentine *and* Trois pépins du fruit des morts. *We published her story of Venice, "The Masked City," in our May 2004 issue and we're pleased to bring you another translated story now.*

Elegy

By Mélanie Fazi

Translated by Christopher Priest

I PLEAD WITH YOU, RETURN them to me — please return them. Or let me in, let me join them. I will not resist. I will come to you in silence to recover them. It will be my own decision, even if it is the only one you leave me.

They would have been seven years old now. They were only five at the time. Have you allowed them to grow? Would I recognize them if they were returned to me this evening? Of course! Even changed, even spoiled by the passage of time, I would recognize them. Only Benjamin would hide his face, deny the loss — he thinks they are gone for good. Two years in which he gave up hope of ever seeing them again. Resigning yourself to the worst is much easier than my way, than going on with the struggle. Hope saps the will more surely than a lapse of memory. He has wasted two years playing at being deaf and blind, making me look like the village idiot. I tried to explain to Benjamin, but he did not want to know anything. It's always the same for him — they were taken away, whoever has them will not return them even if they are still alive. "They're dead, Deborah. Get used to the idea. You'll never see them again."

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Why is it always men who go to pieces? It is not Benjamin who night after night comes to this hill to plead for your leniency. He does nothing but wait, drunk more often than he is sober — counting the seconds, the hours, the years which have passed since that day.

That day, that morning, just after we had woken up, he yelled my name from the doorway to the twins' room. I rushed in, to find it empty. The beds were unmade, the covers were thrown into heaps. The wind was roaring in through the open window. And there was no trace of the children.

Flown away, Adam! Disappeared, Anna!

Rubbed out of our lives, just like that, in one moment, that single second it had taken me to cross to their door. All was lost. There was no going back after that, now that the door had opened on to emptiness. I wanted to think I hadn't seen what happened, so that I could pretend they were still there, on the other side, playing under the covers like two noisy imps. But that morning, for the first time in their five years, they were not waiting for us.

Benjamin opened the door and regarded the empty bedroom. By then it was too late to close his eyes again. He had been drained in a single heartbeat, as suddenly as a bathtub is emptied when the plug is snatched away. He was still gripping the handle of the door when I rushed up behind him and saw with my own eyes. He uttered my first name, but after that he said no more. Something had died behind his eyes, deep down. He said nothing more. From that first day he gave up. He abandoned everything with a single shrug of his shoulders. His twins, his wife, his family. It's so easy to become a human wreck. When sorrow stands as an alibi, anything is possible.

What good is it to hope, Deborah? They have gone.

Benjamin closed the window and locked the twins' door. He was never to reopen it. Closed with a double turn of the lock, creating a sanctum. Spent the first days searching, interrogating neighbors, scouring the fields, more with hope than belief. Finally he settled, comfortably, into quiet despair and wallowed in his loneliness. Now he could let it take over: other people's looks allowed him to. Perhaps the seed had already been in him for a long time. But he had been under self-control for six years. Not a drop of alcohol in front of Adam and Anna, not that, never.

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Benjamin adored his twins. Now for him there was nothing better to fill the vacuum than draining one bottle after the other. Nothing about him changed, at first appearance. He was like a smooth and succulent fruit, but already rotting inside.

There surely were some who joined him in the bar, ready to sow more discontent with their well-meaning looks and annoyed expressions. *You ought to know, Benjamin, we have seen your wife acting weirdly out there at the top of the hill. You should keep your eye on her.* And Benjamin gestured to them to get lost and leave him alone.

I tried to explain to him, though. How could he not see the signs? Pajamas rolled up in a ball, left on the hill, Anna's teddy bear which lay in the middle of the lawn? The window opened *from inside*? What kind of prowler could have broken into the house without causing damage? They opened the window themselves. They knew what they were doing. It is like those vampire stories where the monster may only enter when it has been invited. They opened the window and they left in the night. They came to you because you called them. They came naked as they were on their first day of life. Laughing, surely? Scarcely five years of life, ten years of experience between them, and they could already hear your voice. Me, I never knew to learn. I never wished it either. Until the day when you took them.

I showed Benjamin the marks and the clues. I even brought him to you so that he could see what I can see, but he averted his eyes with an expression of weariness beyond irritation. As if it was I who had become the wreck, the drunkard. As if I had pointed to mirages born of a sick brain. Two years that he has been closed like an oyster, hermetic, because if he opened up, even for a moment, all the whys and hows would flood in, and he would have to acknowledge there is no answer.

So, I was the one who came to you when at last I understood. I think I had done so from the very first. Unable to fight you, I learned how to know you. Over those two years, I have spent more nights with you on this hill than in the marital bed. That is where Benjamin turned his back on me, while breathing the restless sleep of cowards. I came to plead with you, to beg you, to threaten you, and you stayed there with me to scoff. You kept them where I could see them, but they were always beyond my reach. I waited, and I learned. You let me explore, one evening after

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another, while my gestures became more assured. I returned home reeking of your smell. Benjamin slept. He thought I was mad.

If only he had listened to me, just the once. If he had taken in what I told him he would have come to you with an axe, and used it mercilessly. Afterward he would have consigned you to fire, until the memory of the twins flew up in the smoke. He would fire the entire hill, to put the last seal of certainty on his forgetting.

The first few times when I scratched your shell I skinned the palms of my hands. The bark is rough against hands that have not been coarsened. My fists are bruised where they attacked your hard bark. I soiled you with traces of my blood, like a derisory, ridiculous offering. I struck, spat and scratched, a demented woman. This wound in the bark, a trace in the tissue like a scar, it was I who tore off this splinter with my fingernails, one night when silence wounded my ears. That silence asphyxiating me like a fetid smell, on top of the hill, you rearing up in front of me, roots anchored well in the ground. I would have sworn it was you who silenced the noise, who stole the air I was trying to breathe. The twins, weren't they enough for you? I risked glancing down to the bottom of the hill, where the houses were quiet, as if they were blind, then up toward the sky, glimpsed between your branches stretching out to scratch the stars. I felt the weight of the world crushing me. Then I concentrated on the shade of the twins that was in you.

There were nights when I was so desperate I would have torn off the skin on my fingers to strip you of your bark, one flake at a time, leaving you naked, to get to my twins beneath the surface. Then you would have had to return them to me. I would have separated the Siamese creature with my fingernails, to make them into two again, Anna and Adam. I would have attacked you with bare hands, if I had thought it would have done any good.

Instead, I learned. I discovered the intoxicating perfume of your bark after the rain. The feeling of wood beneath my fingers, solid and reassuring, all this power in my arms. The complexity of the mosaic on which my palms slipped, like the scales of an old and fantastic animal. I learned how to know your rough edges, at first with delicate care, as one discovers the skin of a new lover.

Benjamin laughed the first time we made love, eight years ago, close

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to this place. He was a nineteen-year-old urchin who could not believe in his luck. We were married on this hill. After the ceremony he chased me through the brambles which tore at my marriage veils, as foolish as a schoolboy running after girls' skirts. He planted two seeds in me while we lay between the trees, away from the gaze of others. I brushed past you in my torn skirts. Did you know then what was coming?

The bark is not so hard to the touch when one grows used to it. I know through my fingertips the relief map of your grooves, your canyons, the edges where I wounded my hands. I learned the pattern of your wrinkles and your veins, your fault lines and your crevices, the map of your scars. I inspected you as if you were a door without a visible lock, one openable only by looking for the sesame spell. Or as if you were an ancient parchment that had to be deciphered. I'm sure it amused you to watch me? To see me while holding my little ones out of reach?

I don't know how Benjamin failed to see the two masks set in the bark. Two faces drawn in the higher part of the trunk, just below the nodes of your main branches, as if carved from the same wood. They can be seen, though. The features are coarse: just eyes, nose, mouth. Neither lips, nor hair, nor eyebrows. But they seem a natural part of the whole, as if they have always been there. Two oval growths on the trunk, back to back. Admit that you did it on purpose! Two years that they turn their backs on each other, like the two faces of Janus. You did this deliberately, to separate them. It is all part of the irony of the thing: they are together, but they cannot see each other.

You made them so that I cannot see them both at the same time. I have to choose between Adam or Anna. You placed them out of reach, just too far away for me to skim my fingertips across them. I did try, though. But you are huge, on a human scale. The trunk is so large I cannot encircle it with my two arms.

You erased even their differences. The two faces are identical, like two African masks without distinguishing features. They were still at the age where people could confuse them. They often wondered which of the twins was the small girl, which the boy. The same round face, the same black hair cut short, the same eyebrows already clearly featured, inherited from Benjamin. Anna had a small dimple in her left cheek when she laughed. Of the two of them, she was already the wild one. She would have

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made my life difficult if she had grown up. Such a mischievous smile signals great crises ahead. Adam was calmer, more secretive. Undoubtedly because one day he would need boundless patience to unravel the damage of his twin tornado.

I searched for them in the faces of the other children as they walked out of school. All the five-year-old kids of the neighborhood. I watched them passing, as I stood with the group of other mothers. I was rooted to the spot. All these good, home-loving women who would *never* come on the hill for their little ones. But it is true that I spent many days there, to keep an eye on the school. I hated them, those animated faces so full of life. All those little faces too adorable to be fair. They nauseated me.

I sought and found two of them. A little boy, a small girl, both five years old. Almost alike enough to be twins. Perhaps they were cousins. Same black hair, same grasshopper limbs, like Adam, like Anna. One evening I arrived before their mothers. I carried them in my arms to you, offering a trade. And you refused them. I would have delivered every kid in the village to you if you had asked. I would have knifed them with a light heart for the return of my own twins. But carved in wood, the two faces were always waiting.

Did they see me burying their soft toys and their clothing between your roots?

From the first I believed that the face on the left was Anna's. It seemed to me I could see one of the masks smiling, if a smile could be detected under the bark. But I was deluding myself. They are identical, except for small details. And I cannot even see them side by side to compare them. To look closely at one of them, it is necessary to turn away from the other.

Do they look at me, from their perch? And if they do see me, can they at least remember me? Perhaps their memory has become stilled, now that you and they have become one. I always believed that a child cannot forget his mother. You can't avoid such ideas, when face to face with your fears. Two children with the memory of a tree. Lost in their wooden sleep, their chlorophyll dreams.

Certain evenings, I wound myself around your limbs so that I could press my ear against your skin. I thought I could hear something fluttering beneath your bark, almost within reach. It reminded me of my former life,

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when Benjamin's quiet breathing sometimes kept me awake in our bed. I thought I heard twin hearts beating slowly against my ear. But I was just deluding myself again.

Have you at least let them grow? They are always five years old in my head — as they will be, undoubtedly, in their chrysalis. They would be cramped if they were growing physically. They would need to learn how to spread through your membranes to leave them changed. If you were to return them to me this evening, would I recognize them? Two years of sleep nourished by your sap, that must leave a trace. They would inevitably be changed. A little more arboreal, a little less human. But you would return them to me! I would take them again just as they are, I promise you. Benjamin would not understand, but I would take them again, no matter what form they might be in. And whether or not they recognize me.

Was all this to punish me? My mother used to talk to the trees, in her time. She spent nights on this hill, although I never knew why. I was also born to listen to the voices of the trees, but I chose to be deaf to them. You undoubtedly did what you did as a way of recalling me to you, because until then I had refused to listen. But I learn quickly, you see. I listen and I learn. I am on your side now. Let me hear your voice, the one that made my twins run to this hill. They had the gift, too. They came here laughing. Toward their wooden cage. Toward their new skin.

And now, this evening, I have come to ask you to take me. Let me become you. I come in peace, drunk with your perfume, to feel the reassuring touch of wood beneath my palms. I want to blend myself into you, let the bark absorb me. Later, perhaps, you will reject me again. I will be made surrogate mother for you if that is what you wish. Since they will reappear one day. You know how empty a woman feels, when she is a mother without her babies? Benjamin fills his own void his way, by drowning the gaping hole they have left with too much whisky and beer. Me, I want only to take them into me again. Or then the three of us to melt into you.

Let me join you. Ravage me if you must, nourish me with your sap. It is with pleasure that I will be made tree — what do I have to lose here? I don't fear for myself anymore, you see. All I wish is to reach the two faces, to add mine to the fresco. Perhaps one day Benjamin will suddenly pass here and will think he recognizes me in one of the masks. But he will push

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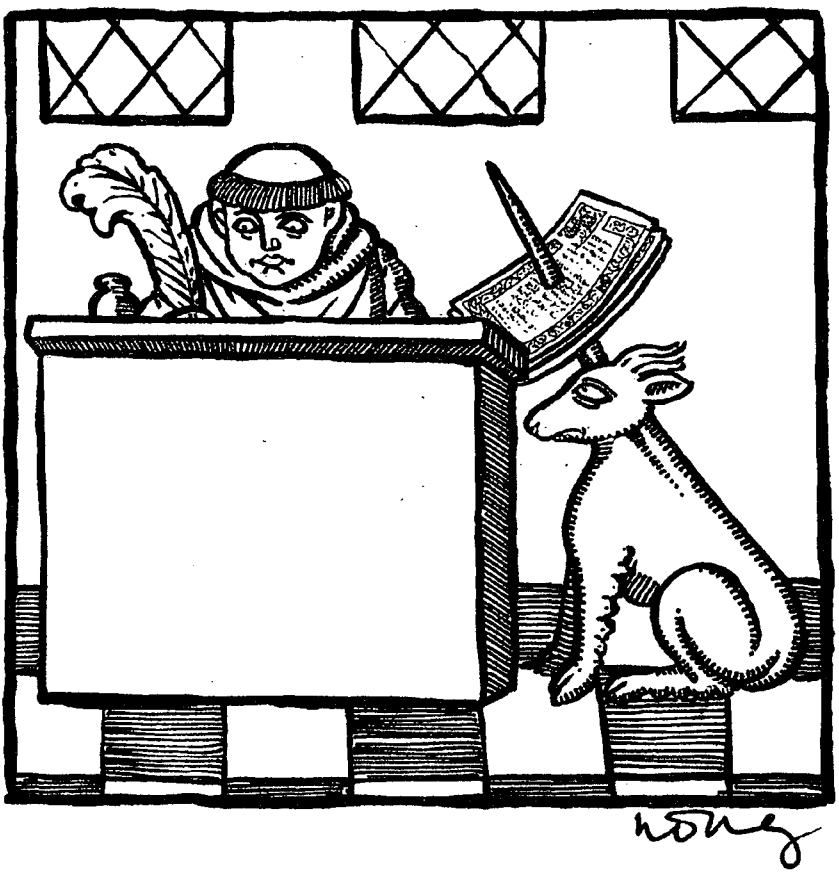
away the idea, think it the delusion of a drunkard, and he will go home again to sleep it off in the empty bed. Poor fool. How he adored his twins!

I want to know what you did to them. It matters little to me that they became wood, foliage, chlorophyll. I want to know and to become like them, even if it is necessary to take a share of you. Accept me into you, put me near them, shelter me from the world.

Don't make me wait any longer.



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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

It's All Goodkind

"[Terry] Goodkind's books are popular in part because, in a complicated world, he boils things down to stark contrasts — good is good, evil is evil, and heroes are studly, hyper-rational armies of one.... In a speech he delivered a few years ago at a bookstore in Virginia...he jumped all over an unnamed novel (and the critic who praised it) because it featured a protagonist involved in a drug deal in Southeast Asia. 'The author and the reviewer are saying that a drug dealer is a normative-value,' Goodkind said. 'That is assigning value to the destruction of life. I instead write about people being the best they can be.'"

— Dwight Garner, "Inside the List," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2006.

I WAS dreading my appointment with Commissioner Goodkine, but there was simply no avoiding it: If I wanted my novel published, the manuscript would have to clear the Federal Board of Literary Normative Values. And the fact that the Commissioner himself had demanded a meeting with me, I believed, did not bode well.

So I dressed as conservatively as possible, affixing to the bosom of my suit jacket a cheap tin lapel pin that represented the image of the FBLNV's "Sword of Truth" (a broad Crusader's blade gripped by a studly hand and slicing off a turbaned heathen's head). Then I stuffed my manuscript in a battered satchel and headed downtown.

The fat, heavy manuscript dragged my arm down and I grew even more depressed, if that were possible. I had never written overstuffed books this big, back before the establishment of the FBLNV. I had been something of a miniaturist, a composer of slim modern fables and surreal allegories. But such forms were proscribed nowadays, and the only acceptable

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fictions were uplifting paeans to man's nobility.

The FBLNV was housed in a magnificent classical-style marble structure only a few years old. Occupying an entire square city block, it boasted enormous domineering columns at its portico. Inscribed on the lintel above the entrance was the First Rule of the FBLNV, adapted from Goodkine's own fiction, where it had been known as "Wizard's First Rule."

PEOPLE ARE STUPID.

I stared at the inscription, shaking my head in ironic bemusement. Then I realized that several video cameras were aimed at me, and that ironic bemusement was not an approved reaction to Federal institutions. So I straightened my shoulders and went inside.

Displaying the official letter demanding my presence to several functionaries quickly earned me passage straight through the vast warren of busy clerks vetting the recreational prose of the nation and into the anteroom of Commissioner Goodkine's office. I sat alone there in a fairly comfortable chair, heavy satchel in my lap, with nothing to look at but a large wall plaque bearing the other nine Rules of the FBLNV, also borrowed from Goodkine's enormous "moral and philosophical" saga. I admired them for one reason: they packed more sententious twaddle into fewer words than any prose I had ever seen.

After half an hour, the inner door to the Commissioner's sanctum swung soundlessly open of its own accord. The manly and assured albeit somewhat Mister Rogers-esque voice of Commissioner Goodkine himself summoned me inside.

The office was decorated with many original paintings, both samples of the Commissioner's own amateur work — marine and wildlife studies — and canvases from his second-favorite artist after himself, Thomas Kinkade.

Behind a broad expanse of mahogany sat Commissioner Goodkine, the ultimate objectivist arbiter of the nation's entertainment in prose form. His dense but micrometer-thick beard, eerily perfect, reminded me of the flocking that used to adorn the cheeks of the early G. I. Joe dolls, while his auburn pony tail invariably brought thoughts of Naomi Judd to my mind.

Commissioner Goodkine did not arise, but offered me a seat in kindly tones. His stern yet beatific face remained neutral. I tried to

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summon up some anger at being called on the carpet in such a humiliating and potentially career-destroying fashion, but couldn't yet get fully aroused.

And Commissioner Goodkine's next words disarmed me completely.

"Mr. Badway, you have the authorial potential to be a best-selling force for the spiritual uplift of our glorious nation. That's why I chose to consult with you personally."

"I — I do?"

Commissioner Goodkine steepled his fingers and allowed a small fatherly smile to grace his lips. "Yes, you do, if you can only come to believe in the rightness of the Goodkine method and principles, which the entire American publishing establishment has seen fit to adopt, under legislative fiat accompanied by severe penalties of jail time and monetary fines for contravention. Remember the Wizard's — I mean, the FBLNV's Sixth Rule: 'The only sovereign you can allow to rule you is reason.' And the Goodkine program is the essence of reason."

"Can I — can I assume then that you've seen some merit in my manuscript? That it might be published someday?"

"Indeed. But not as it stands. Please, bring out your novel. The copy you provided to the Bureau is currently being examined by our third tier of vetters, that group personally trained by me in objectivist rigor."

I dug the mass of printout from my satchel and placed it before the Commissioner. He rifled through it knowledgeably, before holding up a page.

"Here's the kind of thing we'll need to fix. Your protagonist, Rodolpho — at one point he encourages a wounded man to chew on a root to assuage his pain."

Commissioner Goodkine fell silent, obviously awaiting me to volunteer what was wrong with that scene. But for the life of me, I couldn't come up with any response except, "And...?"

Now Commissioner Goodkine looked a little irritated. "Don't you realize that such a scene could be construed as advocating drug use, Mr. Badway? Do you consider drug use a normative value?"

"No, no, of course not. Well, I suppose the wounded man could just suffer stoically, especially if I make him hail from a culture that embraces such a philosophy."

"Excellent!" More pages were shuffled. "Now, how shall we interpret

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this passage, where Rodolpho embraces his fellow soldiers before battle?"

I began to get the gist of what types of things would bother Commissioner Goodkine. "Uh, I take it that perhaps that display of affection might be seen as encouraging homo — "

Commissioner Goodkine held up a hand. "No need to actually use that word, Mr. Badway, we understand each other perfectly. There are other Federal laws we must pay lip service to, after all — for a while yet, anyway. Let's move on. What about here, where a woman is shown with her child, but no mention is made of the existence of her legal spouse? And here, where peasants attempt to overthrow the lawful ruler of their kingdom? And here, where wizards decide to form a union? And here, where music is described as 'pleasantly atonal?' 'Atonal,' Mr. Badway, indeed! All instances of non-normative values, I think you'll agree."

I stood up then and reclaimed my manuscript with a cold precision. All thoughts of giving in to the FBLNV's insane directives had fled my head.

Commissioner Goodkine looked startled. "Mr. Badway, what's the matter? I thought we had come to an understanding?"

"Do you recall your own Wizard's Tenth Rule, Commissioner Goodkine?"

"Why, naturally. 'Willfully turning aside from the truth is treason to one's self.'"

"That's fine, so far as it goes. But you never stopped to consider that one man's truth might be another man's lies."

My words had the same effect upon Commissioner Goodkine that logical paradoxes used to inflict upon thinking machines in cliched science fiction. His mental processes ground to a halt, and I was able to leave his office without further discussion or argument.

"The greatest harm can result from the best intentions," said the Second Rule on the plaque in the anteroom.

Good point, I thought, and went home to write — non-normative all the way.

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Alex Irvine's novels include The Narrows, One King, One Soldier, *and* A Scattering of Jades. *His short fiction has been collected in* Pictures from an Expedition *and* Unintended Consequences. *His latest book,* Batman: Inferno, *has drawn some interesting comments on the Amazon.com page listing for it. (We won't repeat them here, save to say that "It's a freaken [sic] book!" is not cause for a negative rating in our eyes.)*

With this new story, Mr. Irvine ventures into the High Fantasy genre with affecting results.

Wizard's Six

By Alex Irvine

1

IN THE SPRING PAULUS SET out north from The Fells, hunting the apprentice Myros. He cannot be allowed to collect his six, the wizard had said. If you cannot find his track, you must kill whichever of the six he has already selected. It did Paulus' conscience no good to kill people whose only fault was being collected by an aspiring wizard, but he would be only the first of many hunters. Without the guild's protection, a wizard's six were like baby turtles struggling toward the sea. Best to spare them a life of being hunted.

The apprentice had spent enough time in the Agate Tower to know that there would be pursuit. He was moving fast and had four months' head start; Paulus moved faster, riding through nights and spring storms, fording spring-swollen rivers, asking quiet questions over bottles in public houses along the only road over the mountains. He killed the first of the apprentice's collection on a farm between a bend in the road and a

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ripple of foothills: a small boy with a dirty face and a stick in his hand.

Yes, mister, a man passed by here in the winter.

Yes, mister, he had a ring over his glove. I was feeding the pig, and he told me I was a likely boy. Are you looking for him?

Can I see your sword?

They weren't supposed to choose children, Paulus was thinking as he rode on. Even apart from the cultural sanction, children's magic was powerful but unpredictable, tricky to harness. No wonder the guild was after this one.

In a public house that evening, the day's chill slowly ebbing from his feet, Paulus said a prayer for the boy's parents. He hoped they hadn't sent anyone after him. It was bad enough to kill children; he had even less desire to take the lives of vengeful bumpkins. Best to keep moving. Already he had gained a month on the apprentice, who was moving fast for a normal man but not fast enough to stay ahead of Paulus, who had once been one of the king's rangers. Upstairs in his room, Paulus watched a thin drift of snow appear on the windowsill, spilling onto the plank floor. His prayer beads worked through his fingers. Go, boy, he thought. Speed your way to heaven. He dreamed of turtles, and of great birds that flew at night.

In the morning the snow had stopped, and Paulus cut a piece of cheese from a wheel left out in the kitchen. He stuck the knife in the remaining cheese and set a coin next to it, then left through the back door and saddled his horse without waking the stable boy. He rode hard, into the mountains and over the first of the passes where the road lay under drifted snow taller than a man on horseback. The horse picked out the track; like Paulus, it had been this way before. It was blowing hard by noon, when they had come to the bottom of a broad valley dotted with farms and a single manor house. Paulus rode to the gates of the manor and waited to be noticed.

The gate creaked open, revealing a choleric elder in threadbare velvet, huddled under a bearskin cloak. "Who comes to the house of Baron Branchefort?"

Paulus dismounted and let the seneschal see the sigil of the Agate Tower dangling from the horse's bridle. "I ride on an errand from the

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wizards' guild in The Fells," he said. "Has an apprentice traveled through this valley?"

"And how would I know an apprentice?"

"He would wear a ring over the glove on his right hand. He is called Myros."

The elder nodded. "Aye, he was here. Visited the Baron asking permission to gather plant lore."

"Was this granted?"

"It was. He was our guest for a week and a day, then rode to the head of the valley."

"Did he gather any herbs?"

"I did not observe."

"You wouldn't have. His errand has nothing to do with plants. He travels to collect children."

The elder held Paulus' gaze for a long moment. "This is why you follow him."

"It is. Are there children in your house?"

"No. The Baron nears his eightieth year. We have few servants, and no children."

Paulus offered up a prayer of thanks that he would not have to enter the manor. He had seen more than enough of noble houses fallen into somnolence. Standing at the gate of this one, his chest constricted and he thought of his brother.

"Where," he asked, "are the houses in this valley with children?"

The elder looked up at the sky, then down at the ground between his feet. "Many children come into this world," he said. "Few survive. Only one of the Baron's vassals has children below marriageable age. He is called Philo, and his house is the last before the road rises into the mountains again."

Paulus nodded and mounted his horse again.

"You will ease Philo's mind, I pray," the elder said.

"What ease I can give, I will give," Paulus said, and rode north.

Philo's house lay in the shadow of a double peak, across the saddle of which lay Paulus' route over the mountains. As Paulus rode up, the sun rested between the peaks. A man about Paulus' age, but with the

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caved-in chest and stooped neck of too much work and not enough food, was drawing water. A girl of seven or eight years stood waiting with an empty bucket.

"Philo," Paulus said.

"That is my name," Philo said, without looking up at Paulus, as he hauled a full bucket over the edge of the well. He emptied it into the bucket his daughter set on the ground at his feet. "And this is my daughter Sophia. Now you know what of us is worth knowing."

"A young man wearing a ring over his glove has been here," Paulus said.

Philo dropped the bucket back into the well. "He has."

"He spoke to your daughter."

"That's right, sir, he did. Told her she was a likely girl. She's always seemed so to me, but if I was any judge of men or girls I wouldn't be here." Still Philo had not met Paulus' gaze. Paulus began to wonder what had passed between him and Myros; or was his demeanor caused by the Brancheforts?

No matter.

"I come from The Fells," Paulus said. "My instructions are to gather the girl he spoke to. For service at the Agate Tower."

At this, Philo looked up and Paulus and put a hand around his daughter's thin shoulders. Now it was Paulus who wanted to look away. He forced himself to hold Philo's eye. "She's my only, sir," Philo said. "And my wife, we're too old to have another."

"Philo," Paulus said. "I have no quarrel with you. My errand is my errand."

He watched the awful calculus of the peasant on Philo's face. One fewer mouth to feed. Giving his daughter over to a life of service with the wizards of The Fells, where she would spend the rest of her days forgetting what it was like to go to bed hungry. And against that....

"May we visit her, sir?"

"When she has been gone a year," Paulus said. He was a poor liar, but this provision he remembered from his own journey to The Fells as a boy, when he had been taken into the King's Acrobats.

His mother had never come. After a year he had stopped expecting her.

"Before that," he said, "she will still long for home. You may write as

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long as you do not ask her to return. Censors at the guild will destroy your letters if you do."

Philo was nodding slowly. "We do love her, sir," he said. "She's our only."

And through all this, the girl Sophia spoke not a word.

"I will return in the morning," Paulus said.

The ruse had cost him a day, and cost him, too, any chance of a better meal than jerky eaten under a tree. Paulus had started back to the manor house, then veered away from the road into a copse of beech and spruce. He had already lied more that day than during the previous ten years, and could no more maintain his fabrications than strike down young Sophia of Branchefort Valley in her father's presence. So he hobbled his horse, found dry ground beneath the spreading branches of a spruce tree, and prayed until sleep came. Then he dreamed of his mother, refusing to look at him as he craned his neck to see through the wagon gate and cried out *Mama, good-bye, Mama.*

In the morning, Sophia was waiting in the lambskin coat Philo had been wearing the afternoon before. Rabbit fur wrapped her feet, and she held a small satchel in both hands. Philo and her mother stood behind her, each with a hand on her; the woman's hand moved to smooth the coat's collar, tug a tangle out of Sophia's hair. Philo reached down and took his daughter's hand.

"May she write us?" the woman said.

"After a year, ma'am," answered Paulus. "Should she prove unsuitable, I will bring her back myself, with no dishonor to you. It's many a child isn't meant for the wizards' service."

"Not unsuitable, not our Sophia," Philo said. He swallowed.

"Philo," Paulus said. "Can you spare this coat? She will be warm on the journey."

"I'd like her to have it," Philo said. "It's all we can give her."

Paulus could come up with no convincing reply. "There's fresh eggs and bread in the bag," Sophia's mother said.

"I thank you, ma'am," Paulus said. "I am Paulus. Your man and I met yesterday."

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"I am Clio, sir," she said. She was looking hard at him — seeing, Paulus knew, the scars on his hands and the long sword on his right hip.

"Your daughter has her destiny, Clio," Paulus said. "I am here to take her to it."

Baby turtles, he told himself. Another might have killed all three by now, and moved on. The thought gave him no ease. He averted his eyes as Philo and Clio made their farewells. Braver than either, Sophia took Paulus' hand and climbed onto the saddle in front of him. A tremor ran through her small body, but she reached out to get her fists into the horse's mane. She looked back at her parents as Paulus spurred the horse northward, and he wondered what she saw.

When she spoke, much later when the northern pass out of Branchefort Valley was behind them, Paulus didn't register her voice at first. He was thinking about the boy who had been feeding his pig when Myros came. How easily children died. "Sir?" the girl said. "What do you call the horse?"

"I never named him," Paulus said.

"Can I call him Brown?"

"All right."

"Your name is Brown," Sophia told the horse.

He could kill her at any time, could have killed her at any moment since crossing the pass. Could, for that matter, have cut her down with the empty bucket in her hands while her father was drawing water. Hesitation kills, Paulus thought.

"What are the wizards like?" she asked.

"They are wizards," Paulus said. "Not like men. But not cruel."

"How long until we get there?"

"A little while yet," Paulus said. He was silent after that, and they rode the edge of a canyon in which night fell early and forced them to make camp while the sky above was still light.

At times, Paulus knew, he was slow to apprehend the consequences of his actions. Now he realized that he had complicated his task first by concocting a story and then by taking the girl. She was one of the apprentice's six; Myros might well know that Paulus had her, and if he also knew about the boy he might be provoked into retaliation. Better to

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have killed her quickly and ridden on. Regardless of the wizard's injunction, Paulus could not afford to carry her with him in his pursuit of Myros. Nor could he return her, now that his mouth had run away with his reason and pronounced that she might be returned if she did not satisfy the wizards. He could easily imagine what such a stigma might mean to a child in a place like Branchefort Valley. He stirred Philo's eggs over the fire and damned himself for losing sight of his task.

Over the sound of the night breeze in the canyon, he heard Sophia crying quietly. End this, he thought, and rose into a crouch.

"I'm afraid," she said, and the sound of her voice destroyed his resolve. He sat next to her. Paulus had no knowledge of children. He had none of his own and had been taken from his own home at about Sophia's age, leaving behind three younger sisters whom he had never seen again.

"Never been out of the valley before?" he asked her.

She shook her head and wiped at her nose before tearing a piece of bread from the loaf and scooping eggs out of the bowl. Cowardice was a thick, bitter syrup in Paulus' throat. The boy with the stick in his hand had fallen without a sound, face still bearing traces of his smile at seeing Paulus' sword — yet Paulus knew that in the dying reaches of the boy's brain had been the knowledge of his murder. He found that he could not bear the idea of Sophia dying with that same knowledge. Her name, he thought. If I had not learned her name....

"Let me tell you a story," Paulus said, and then he fell silent because he couldn't remember any stories. He remembered the sound of his father's voice telling him stories when he was a small boy, but he couldn't hear any of the words. "There was a little girl who dreamed that she was a bird," he began, and he let his voice follow the idea of that bird until Sophia was asleep. In the morning he buried the crusts of the bread with her, and burned the coat over her grave. As he climbed out of the canyon into sunlight, a wind sharp with snow raised gooseflesh on his arms. He filled his lungs and held his breath until the edges of his vision faded into red, then exhaled slowly, slowly, feeling his mind start to fade. At the point of unconsciousness he let himself breathe again, deeply and freely. He did not remember where he had learned the exercise, but it cleared his mind, and as his horse — Brown — picked his way across frosted scree below a peak like the head of a boil, Paulus let his mind wander. During

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the short time he had slept the night before, he had dreamed of being a dog, in a warm room with thick rugs and two great stone chairs too high for him to leap onto. There had been a kind woman and an old, old man, and another man who would not look at him but spoke gently. *O queen*, he thought; and after that, *O brother*.

The motion of a hare bounding between rocks drew his attention. He slipped an old throwing knife from its sheath at the small of his back and waited for it to move again, thinking that now he was over the first high ridge of peaks and in this expanse of alpine valleys, game would be more plentiful. In the high country, above treeline, was nothing but pikas and the occasional adventuresome goat. He wished he had brought a bow, but the truth was that no one had ever mistaken him for a skillful archer; his boyhood circus training, though, had served him well where knives were concerned. When the hare made its move, Paulus flicked his wrist. Simple. Five minutes later, the hare was dressed and dangling from his saddle. He rode on, trying not to think of sopping up the hare's fat with Sophia's bread. Skill with knives or no, Paulus knew that hunger was going to be a close companion as he moved farther from settled regions. The hermits and occasional isolated hamlets huddled in the valleys would not all be as hospitable as the Brancheforts had been.

Sparser settlement also meant that it would be harder to track Myros — although Myros would have his own problems, chief among them finding four more children to collect. Paulus had no doubt that all six of Myros' collection would be children, and the certainty had come so quietly that he was reluctant to examine it too closely. He mistrusted his own intuition, feeling that it was often fueled by whatever it was he had paid the wizard to make him forget, and he feared breaking the spell by looking too closely at the workings of his mind.

There was the problem, too, of where Myros was going — and why. Moving north as fast as feet could carry him, moving deeper and deeper into the winter that had already left the lowlands, Myros fled as if frantic to go backward in time. If he kept heading north, he would reach the marshes and tundras that gave onto the ice-choked Mare Ultima. What would Myros want with the tribes who followed the whales and caribou?

A stirring in Paulus' mind set his fingers tingling with more than the cold. *I can block the memories of your mind*, the wizard had said, *but the*

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body's memories are beyond my reach. Paulus looked at his hands and wondered what they remembered. He had paid good silver for his forgetfulness, but no wizard had yet charmed the curiosity out of man or woman, or the desire. Paulus' brother was ample evidence of that.

2

DAYS PASSED, and fell from memory with the sunset. Paulus saw no one, and stopped remembering his dreams. He was well into the second range of mountains, leading Brown on a foot trail skirting snow-buried canyons, when he found the apprentice's third. He saw smoke funneling out of a crevice on the canyon wall, and found a cave entrance below it. Calling in, he roused an old hermit and described Myros. "Yes," the hermit nodded, and invited Paulus in for hot water and flat bread. "He was here. And yes, he spoke to my lad and moved on. Quite a soft one to be this deep in the mountains."

Paulus thought, but did not say, that there were many kinds of hardness.

"And he would not eat, nor drink," the hermit went on. Paulus watched his fingers, how they moved through the silent catechism of the hermit's god. Nine beads on a catgut string, a sacred abacus ticking off the arithmetic of holiness. I will pray after, Paulus thought. Not now.

"I thank you for your welcome," he said.

The hermit did not acknowledge this. "Wizards," he grumbled, and spat into the fire.

"Myros is not yet a wizard," Paulus said. "I am sent to make sure he never will be."

In the hermit's eyes, Paulus saw suspicion. And something else; their expression teased at a memory, irritating like a hair on the back of the tongue. Eyes like gray stones, they put him in mind of something, stirred echoes of a kind of love that he could not remember feeling since he was a boy.

"If you are following him," the hermit said, "what does it matter whether he spoke to my lad?"

You have not been gone from inhabited places as long as all that, old

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man, thought Paulus. "I need to know if he is collecting," he said, and might have said more but the hermit threw hot water in his face and at the same time someone caught hold of his hair from behind. He threw a forearm across his throat and felt the impact of the blade, and then burning as the hermit kicked the embers of the fire across his leggings. Paulus scissored his legs, scattering the coals back toward the hermit, and with his left hand gripped the wrist of whoever had hold of his hair. The blade caught him on the cheek, and with an animal roar he squeezed until he felt bones snap. The grip on his hair loosened, and he pivoted to his feet, twisting the arm and breaking it again before he saw that he held a long-haired boy of perhaps thirteen, face twisted with hate and fear and pain. Paulus let him go, and the boy sprang up with the knife again. Stepping to his right, Paulus slapped the knife hand down and punched the boy hard on the left temple, knocking him straight down into the packed-earth floor, where he lay motionless save for a slow movement of his lips.

Looking over his shoulder, Paulus saw the hermit brandishing a burning branch. I have tried lies, and I have tried truth, he thought. This time he did not speak at all.

The next morning, in the sunny mouth of a snow cave near a frozen creek, Paulus ran his fingers carefully along his wounds. He had done this the night before, but could not credit what his fingertips reported. His cheek was unmarked, though his tongue felt a chipped molar where the thrust of the boy's blade had landed, and on his forearm a deep cut ran for three inches or so, then stopped for slightly more, then began again before tapering into a scratch near the outside of his elbow. Paulus probed the skin between the two cuts as he reconstructed the fight in his mind. One blow across the arm, one blow to the cheek, then he had turned. Could he have forgotten a third strike? It seemed impossible. The uncut skin felt normal to the touch, but when he pressed the point of a knife into it, he could not leave a mark. An odd smell filled his nostrils, raising the hair on his forearms and shrinking his testicles though he could not identify it and did not know why he should be afraid. The forgetting, he thought. Perhaps the body cannot forget any more than a bird can forget to fly south.

Well. Put it from your mind, he told himself. You paid for the forgetting, and must have had a good reason.

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More important was the fact that Myros knew he was being pursued. The hermit's ambush made that clear, and that meant that at the time Paulus had killed the boy on the farm, Myros had not yet collected the hermit's acolyte. So, Paulus reasoned, I am closing on him, but he will have laid traps where time and circumstances allow. Hesitation kills, and even more fatal is the failure to learn from mistakes. Three of Myros' collection remained. Each, no doubt, would pose more risk than the last — and Myros himself could not be underestimated. The time for a budding wizard to gather his collection came near the end of his studies, when he could go no further without the actual performance of magic. Together, the sparks of magic in each of the six merged into a wizard's strength, and in fact his life, since a wizard lived only as long as one of his collection survived. Paulus wasn't sure which would be more difficult, eliminating the six or confronting Myros after he had completed his collection. The apprentice would not have completed his studies, but he would have learned enough in the Agate Tower to be a difficult opponent.

Paulus had killed wizards before. He could do it again. He could also fail, and although he did not fear death, he feared dying and believed that knowledge of the difference between the two was the true wellspring of courage. Having taken money from the wizards' guild, however, Paulus knew better than to abandon his mission. He finished the flat bread he had taken from the hermit's cave, and gnawed the last of the rabbit, and went on.

He came to tundra, and found a thin track that followed the course of a north-flowing river. Memories threatened, and Paulus held his breath until they went away. Five days he walked, eating little and haunted by the prospect of remembering. Often he thought of his brother, dead these four years, and of the strange sacrifice his brother had made. More often still he thought of the king whose father had killed Paulus' father, and who had taken Paulus into his service and transformed him from an acrobat into the man he now was. Something slippery and vast remained just out of reach in his mind, and although he fought the impulse, he could not help grasping after it. Nor could he help tracking his fingers across the blank patch of skin between the two healing cuts, or the bearded cheek that had not parted for the acolyte's dagger. The magic is faltering, he thought, and

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was glad that he might be whole again but afraid that he might find his failures more complete as well.

A village of thatched huts hugged the sandy inside of a bend in the river. Four men came out to meet him, careful not to point their spears too directly at him, and speaking a language that Paulus knew only in fragments from fellow soldiers. They recognized the sigil of the king on the hilt of his sword, and the figure of the Agate Tower on the medallion tied to Brown's bridle, and when he asked about the apprentice who wore a ring over his glove they nodded and pointed to a lean-to of driftwood and sod downstream of the village.

When he knocked at the crooked sticks of the door, it fell in, and before Paulus could draw his sword he was set upon by dogs. A ringing rose in his ears and he killed them, one at a time while the others tore at his legs and leapt snarling at his face. Before they were all dead a spear struck a glancing blow across the back of his head; Paulus caught the last dog, ran it through, and used its body as a shield to catch the thrust of the next spear. He twisted the dog's body, jerking the spear from the hands of the villager who had held it, and killed him. The other three spread into a semicircle around him. Blood warm on the back of his neck, Paulus said, "He was dead when Myros came here and you did not set your dogs on him. Where is he?"

The answer was three spears, driven at once toward his gut. He stepped to his left, between two of them, and struck down the two villagers before they could regain their balance. "You're not killing caribou now," Paulus said to the last of them. "Leave off."

It wasn't working. Paulus looked into the last man's face and saw a look he had come to know well in his days with the king's army. May I never come to the point, he prayed, when I am willing to die for the sake of not being shamed by my failure to kill myself uselessly. A shouting pierced the ringing in his ears, and he looked to his left, upstream, where an old man and a younger woman stood with two children, a boy and a girl. Naked. Twins. The children stared wide-eyed at Paulus, streaked in blood and holding the carcass of a dog. They stared at the three dead men sprawled around him, and at the dead dogs fanning out from the open doorway of the driftwood lean-to. Their expressions did not change as the elder, standing behind them and looking Paulus in the eye, held up a bone

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knife and cut their throats before the eyes of the village. First the girl, then the boy, knelt and looked down at the blood running down their bellies. They put their hands over their wounds. The boy coughed, and sucked in a huge breath before choking blood out of his mouth. The girl's mouth opened and her tongue came out as if she had tasted something bad. Then both of them, almost at once, put out a bloody hand to the ground and used it to guide their bodies down to rest.

Something broke inside Paulus. The ringing in his ears disappeared, and he lowered his sword. "They were dead when Myros came," he repeated. "I am made the instrument of his madness."

In the woman's eyes was something neither pity nor hate. "Go," the woman said.

Many children I have let live, Paulus thought that night. Other men might have killed them all.

And still other men, he answered himself, would have returned the wizards' money before killing the boy with the stick.

Again he grasped after the easy justification: Once Myros collected them, they were going to die. Baby turtles. Paulus had been kinder about it than most would have. Still and yet, there were men who made their way in the world without killing children. Paulus prayed to one day be among them.

One more. He lay looking at the northern stars, knowing that some baby turtles survived, and thinking: One more.

And on into the country of stone and smoke and ice, where men ate seals and great bears ate men. The world is running out of land, Paulus thought. The sixth cannot be far. After the hermit's trap and the ambush laid at the village, he was no longer traveling, but patrolling, eyes and ears sharpened for possible threats, right hand moving restlessly back and forth between Brown's saddle horn and the pommel of his sword. He caught himself praying under his breath, and wondered with wry humor if this was what it took for him to discover piety. Also he had the feeling that the membrane of his forgetting was growing dangerously thin, as if the part of his mind veiled by magic was speaking to him, more loudly and insistently with each hour he traveled north.

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I have been here before, he thought — and held his breath until the world grew purplish at the edges and he felt himself swaying in the saddle.

On a morning sharp with ocean breeze and the smells of northern plants awakening to the promise of summer's endless days, Paulus came upon a farmer plowing. Pulling his own blade, the man bent to his work, shirtless and running with sweat even in the chill air. Paulus rode to him, sword drawn and leveled. When the farmer looked up, he asked, "Has a young man with a ring over his glove passed this way?"

The farmer let the handles of his plow drop and squinted up at Paulus. "It's you," he said.

Paulus raised his sword, and would have killed the farmer except the man spoke his name. "How do you know my name?" he asked. "Was it Myros who told you?"

"Do you — it hasn't been that long."

"Since what?"

The farmer cocked his head. "You don't remember me, either, do you? Will?"

"Why would I?"

"Oh," the farmer — Will — said. "You had a magic done, didn't you?"

Paulus' sword point dipped in Will's direction.

"Paulus," Will said. "Your apprentice was here, yesterday, and he did collect a boy. But there's more you need to know."

"No, there isn't," Paulus said. "I don't know how you know me, or if you know me or if Myros left you this part to play. None of that matters. Take me to the boy."

"Well, I was going to do that," Will said. "After all, he's yours."

The membrane stretched thinner, and then Will added, "From Joy. When you came to kill the dragon."

And Paulus remembered.

When he tried to sleep, he heard the dragon.

The whisper of its scales, their soft scrape and rattle. The cold draft of its indrawn breath, so like the breath of a cave. The slow creak of its wings, unfolding in the dark. All memory now, the ghost of his bitter triumph scratching its way through the inside of his mind.

He rolled over, felt the mattress under him: so soft, softer than the

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wintry mountainside where he'd camped the night before he'd gone into the dragon's lair. In a corner of his chamber, a mouse scampered. There were hours yet before dawn.

He threw back the sheet and stood. In the courtyard below his window, the bucket hung over the well swung in the night wind. A light shone in the stables, and Paulus shrugged into a robe. The groom, Andrew, rarely slept and had grown accustomed to Paulus' intrusions in the middle of the night.

Before going down to the stables, Paulus rummaged in the dark for the bottle on his nightstand. Better to bring a gift when interrupting another man's solitude.

Andrew looked up at the squeak of the stable door's hinges. "Paulus," he said. Paulus set the bottle on the square table Andrew used to cut tack, and the old groom grinned. "The dragon again," he said.

Paulus sat heavily on the cutting bench.

Killing the dragon: the shock of the blade driven at an angle below the scales behind its shoulder, the scalding spray of blood over his hands and face (no blade can cut his face now, nor a long irregular patch of skin on the inside of his right forearm where the seam of his jerkin had split), the long ropes of skin and muscle hanging from Paulus' flanks and legs where its claws had raked him, the sight of his own bones. And then the woman who put him on a sledge and dragged him to her hearth, where the winter passed into spring without him remembering, and in the spring when he was strong again he desired her, and would have taken her back to The Fells; but although she gave freely of her body and her love, she would not leave her birthplace. So he had come back, and slept little and drunk much, and spent the dying hours of the night with Andrew at the tack bench, until with the last of the bounty on the dragon he had purchased his forgetting.

Paulus woke.

In her language, her name meant Joy. She had had one man before him, killed the year before, hunting the horned whales among the ice floes of the Mare Ultima. Perhaps she had had none after.

He could remember the smell of the cutting bench as if it were in the room with him. The morning after sharing that last bottle with Andrew,

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he had gone to a spell broker and negotiated the terms of his forgetting. Now he remembered it all again: The pain that crept like worms under his skin as the dragon's poison did its slow work, the way the screams had fought their way out of his mouth as she dragged him down the hillside and for miles along the riverside trail. The pungency of her remedies, and the spasms of his body as they drew the poisons out. The long silences in her house, broken only by the whickering of the wind in the thatched roof — and at last the moment when he had caught her hand and said, *Come to me.*

The boy, Paulus thought. The boy now sleeping on his pallet near the farmer's hearth. He could be mine.

I want him to be mine.

He could never have imagined himself feeling this. He felt newly full, spilling over, as if the unstoppering of his memory had scoured away other walls. Paulus sat up, sealskin covers falling away from him. He had spoken to the boy the day before, Will hanging back with more discretion than Paulus would have expected. A simple conversation, and when the boy had asked in his pidgin four-year-old way to see Paulus' sword, Paulus knew he did not have it in him to kill this boy. Perhaps it was the fact that he might be killing his own offspring — though that had not stopped a number of men Paulus had known, and even admired — and perhaps it was simply the lesson of this journey. The Book of the god to whom Paulus prayed spoke of the Journey, and the Lesson. Part of Paulus' attraction to this faith was his life's own journeying, the travels and travails; now here was a chapter of the Book incarnate in these four limbs, these two eyes and small voice. The boy did not know that Paulus might be his father. Will had not been so bold. Paulus wanted to tell him, and he burned on the forks of a problem. Duty spoke with the voice he had always heeded; the dawning reality of kinship, and the small hope he held of being able to face his maker, spoke in quietly unanswerable opposition.

Paulus remembered sunrises slanting in through the cobwebby windows of Andrew's tack shed. Had Andrew ever seen Paulus on the streets of The Fells, thought to hail him perhaps? Had he told Andrew of his plan to buy the forgetting?

The sun was not yet up. Will was moving around just outside the door, and Paulus could hear the deep, even breaths of the boy. His boy. The sixth of Myros' collection.

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Paulus stretched. He had not slept under a roof in more than a month, and his body was aging past the point when it could easily absorb a month on the campaign. The scars along his ribs hurt, and his shoulders popped, and in an instant of quiet revelation he understood that Myros had collected children, and Paulus had killed them, because Myros wanted the dragon Paulus had killed four years before.

Will had a copy of the Book on a tree-stump table beside his hearth. It was still too dark to read, but Paulus paged through the Book anyway, soothing himself with the beads in his fingers and the familiar weight and texture of the faith he had known all his life. He thought he was looking for something in the Book, but he did not know what, and when enough light had returned to the sky that he could discern the words, he set the Book aside and went to his saddlebag for whetstone and oil.

Sharpening his sword, Paulus imagined the boy grown into a soldier, and was filled with a black fury at what the world had done to him. No, he thought. The boy slept as only a child can, still as death, unstirred by the scrape of the whetstone. Memories rode in on the tide of Paulus' anger. In the Book was a story of a girl named Lily, saved by a story whispered in her ear while she was sleeping. Thinking of it, Paulus found his own tongue loosening. A story came to him, and as he remembered it he told it to the boy.

3

LEGEND HAD IT that the commoners' gift of magic came from the gods' anger at the separation of people into high and low. Like all legends, this one was as good an explanation as any, and the kingdom largely subscribed to it. One bit of magic, to be deployed once and only once, whether foolish or wise: this was the commoner's reward for a lifetime of subservience. The jester found this delicious, and wasted no opportunity to crow over the kingdom's fatuous belief. But the jester had secrets, and reasons.

Much of his life was apparent in the topology of his face. The king's common subjects bore an expression of calm security, a faith in their sovereign and in their one bit of magic to see them through whatever demands life would place upon them. But as if he had been built by one of

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the angry gods, the jester's face quirked and twisted with freshly remembered regret, and his cast eye, forever looking vacantly away to his right, took on a hōrrible aspect when his humor turned scabrous and biting. The younger princes and princesses fled the throne room at his every entrance, pushing each other in most ignoble haste, and the queen reluctantly took action when the youngest prince, awakening in mortal fear from a nightmare of the jester's crooked eye and whiplash tongue, ran blindly from his room and broke both of his legs in a fall down a flight of stairs.

Only a few hours later, in the throne room, the queen looked sadly from her liege lord to his *memento mori*, telling each that the safety of the royal progeny outweighed decades of service and reward. "His loyalty to you speaks well of him," she said to the king. "Even your dog is not so loyal."

The old dog looked up at her, the tip of his tail twitching. The jester thought that if he had had a tail, it might have twitched as well.

The queen spoke more than she knew, and behind his beard the king mused. The jester farted outrageously and refused to say a word, but within the scrawny rack of his chest, his heart beat with both fear and love for the queen who at that moment was proposing that he be pensioned off to a mountain barony safely away from tender gazes. His love for her exceeded the bounds even of his love for ruler and kingdom, and in that moment the jester bitterly regretted the day when he had loosed his one bit of magic to save the king.

Outside the castle walls, the jester sat crosslegged against a dead tree, looking out over the shore of a lake whose surface was rippled like an old window. He was tired of conjuring witty deflating comments. Tired of handstands, tired of juggling the skulls of the king's would-be assassins. He'd grown old, found aches in his joints and sleepless nights at the end of every day. There were many things he wished had never happened.

The jester had not always been a jester, any more than the king had been a king or the king's dog had been a dog. The day the old king died, the crown prince sat a silent vigil by his father's body until midnight, when he leapt to his feet and went to the chamber door. "Tomorrow a barred door closes on me," he said to his guard. "Tonight I walk through my city."

In the marketplace the uncrowned king walked among his subjects.

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He flirted with shop girls, bought perhaps one too many flagons of wine, and found himself in the shadow of the city walls watching a pair of ragged street performers. They were tired and performed reluctantly, but he gave them the strength of gold thrown at their feet. When the first birds had begun to chirp in anticipation of the dawn, the pair of acrobats were still turning their tumbles and mining their repertoire for tricks this munificent stranger had not yet seen.

Few things travel faster than news of a king's death, and the two weary acrobats were attuned to town gossip as only itinerant clowns can be. The older brother had absorbed the news and let it find a resting place in his mind; the younger had grown consumed with desire to avenge an injustice perpetrated by the dead king many years before, when an unlucky circus ringmaster had made an inopportune comment about the old king's cleft palate. One thing that travels faster than news of royal death is tidings of royal insult, and before long the ringmaster had vanished into the castle dungeon as his two boys performed with masklike faces before their sovereign, who rose at the end to pronounce the show the most excellent he'd seen in many a year.

The older son had made his peace with this. One lived in one's world, and one did not insult the king. The younger, though, turned the injustice inward and fed on it, not realizing that it was also feeding on him. Over a span of ten years man and hatred grew more to look like one another, and at last on a breezy summer night with dew on the ivy that climbed the city walls, the younger brother, addled with fantasies of regicide, saw his chance for revenge.

It would be their final routine, the brothers told their sole watcher. Dawn was coming, and besides they knew no trick to better it.

The uncrowned king accepted this. "I have been well entertained," he said, "and who better than you to know when you have no more to give?"

Nodding, the brothers unfolded a leather package containing ten knives. "Ready?" the older asked.

"We should rehearse it once."

"Start with three, then."

The king couldn't be certain whether the clowns were really so uncertain of this routine, or whether the uncertainty was part of their patter. Predawn gleam flashed on the knife blades as they flickered

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between the two brothers in a pattern almost intelligible. "Marvelous," the king said. "I imagine that's dangerous given your eye. Can you see out of it?"

Only for a moment, an eyeblink or even less, a long-dormant sense of hurt bloomed in the older brother. His life had given him a keen sense of irony, and it never escaped his notice when audiences tossed comments toward him of the sort that had gotten his father killed. The pain passed almost immediately, but not before causing a tremor in his throwing hand.

Blades clashed as the younger brother knocked the errant throw from the air. "Careful, brother," he said. The older brother blinked.

"Well enough," he lied. "I see well enough."

Six knives again, this time flawless for thirty seconds. Then the younger brother said, "Now four. Now." Together they stooped, and the gleaming pattern between them recomplicated itself just long enough for the king to think *Masterful*. Then the younger brother cried out and dropped his knives in a clatter. One of them bounded toward the king, who reached to pick it up.

"Not to worry, Your Majesty," the younger brother said. He stooped to retrieve the knife, and just as it registered in the king's mind that this slim and smiling trickster knew who he was — had watched him from crowds since he was old enough to assume the paste crown of First Successor — the younger brother leaned in low and thrust the knife into the king's belly.

What should have followed then was a lingering death and a hasty scampering escape over the city walls, but the uncrowned king was not quite the fool the younger acrobat had thought him. His mail shirt, forged within subterranean earshot of the cell where the old ringmaster had died wishing for sunlight, caught the blade and held it with only an inch of its tip parting skin and muscle. The younger brother's weight bore the king over, and he lay on his back, struggling to catch his breath and looking calmly into the eyes of his assassin.

"This blood," the younger brother said, holding his cut hand so the blood dripped onto the king's face. "It is my father's, and I will avenge it." He drew another knife from his belt.

"You are older than I am," the king said. "I do not know your father. Your grievance is with a dead man."

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"When you are dead," the younger brother said, "I will have no grievance." He planted one knee in the king's chest. His brother called his name.

"Kill me, then," said the king. "But know that you redress no wrong. You kill as a mad dog kills, because you don't know what else to do."

Perhaps the younger brother hesitated for a moment, or perhaps magic saw its opportunity and spoke through his elder sibling's mouth; but before the knife could fall the older brother said, "You will not be a mad dog, brother. You will not repay shame with shame."

With those words, his life's one bit of magic whirlpooled from his body, and where a moment before the king had lain helpless under an assassin's knife, now the older brother watched as a small brown dog pawed at the king's tunic and strained to lick his chin.

The king pushed the dog aside and with a disgusted noise jerked the knife from the broken links of his mail. "Did you know who I was?" he asked.

The remaining brother, three knives in his two dangling hands, shook his head.

"It is odd," the king said, and had to pause for breath. He struggled to his feet. "To thank a man who would turn his brother into a dog."

"Odder yet to save the son of the man who killed my father," the older brother replied.

The king looked from the older brother to the attentive dog, who limped ever so slightly on one front paw. "So," he said.

"But I have seen men die, and few were able to face it as you did," the older brother went on. He began to gather up his props and gimmicks. "I thought I saw a kingly man in you." He tried to say something more, but he could not speak of what he had done.

The dog sat in front of the king. His tail wagged against one of the fallen knives, and he started up at the clatter and ran a few steps before returning with tail and nose both low to the ground. "Take care of my brother," said the lone acrobat as he shouldered his pack. "I see he wishes to remain with you."

"Why should I not kill him?"

The acrobat looked the king in the eye. "Your grievance is not with a dog."

Dawn broke on the castle's highest towers.

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"True," said the king. "Very well, he will remain with me. As will you. I will have you and your brother at my throne, one to remind me of how close to death I came, and the other to remind me of why I was allowed to live. Walk with me, king's jester."

All of this was bad enough; but then the jester fell in love with the queen.

He remembered the moment of falling in love like a story told by someone else. The great stones of the hall outside the throne room, pale gray except streaks on either side, where generations of the royal wolfhounds had rubbed their ears along the grooves and ridges in the ancient stones. This king, whose life the jester had saved, was the first in memory to keep a limping brown dog of anonymous pedigree instead of the great loping hounds named for stars and mythical ancestors.

Passing her in the hall: she taller by a head and younger by two generations, he favoring a heel bruised earlier that day tumbling for an ambassador. She with hair the color of the old streaks in the walls, a brown almost black, and eyes the color of the untouched stones, the gray of a cloud heavy with lightning; he with a balding head and knuckles swollen by winter's chill. The jester became exalted in that moment, realizing that she was the castle, she was the kingdom, it was the twin example of her kindness and her iron rectitude that made it possible for the king to spare the jester's brother. He loved her because she seemed in that moment to him like an ideal given flesh, an ideal for which the sacrifice of a brother was not too great. Foolish, yes, and sentimental: but as good an explanation as any.

It haunted the jester that he had been willing to kill his brother. And he had; only the fickleness of magic had sped his mouth and stayed his hand. He found some small comfort in the royal heir's person, his utter lack of resemblance to his father. The old king had been capricious, vindictive, wanton in both kindness and cruelty. His successor remained scrupulous and fair, even generous. Around him the kingdom prospered without war.

And I didn't kill my brother, the jester thought. I saved him. I protected him, as an older brother must.

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The king's dog was old now, gray around the muzzle and lame in his hind legs. A superstition arose that the king would live only as long as his dog (no one said this about the jester), and although the king knew better, still he protected the dog's life as jealously as his own, lest its death provoke unrest in the kingdom. The irony of this kept the jester in fine form for the mordant humor expected of him at court.

What would happen, he wondered, if the king were actually persuaded to foist him off on some rustic baron? Sooner or later, wouldn't the story of the dog his brother leak between the royal lips? And wouldn't the queen ...? The duty of her heart was to her husband, and of her mind to her king. She would have the dog killed out of a kind of loathing mercy, pitying the beast its lost humanity even as she ordered it drowned to ensure that no entombed memory would resurface and tear out the throat of the sleeping king.

Having once thought this, the jester grew certain events could play out no other way, just as having once seen the queen as his own ideals bodied forth, he could never rid himself of his passion for her. Exaltation fled him. "Why must I love her?" he demanded of the sky, but the clouds of course took on the color of her eyes and kept their peace. Love twisted inside him the way magic had on its way from his body, anguish and ecstasy. Loving the queen who would kill his brother, the jester could only think of her implacable magnificence, her mind like light in cold water.

It was afternoon. The jester left the lake, went back to the city and the castle, and the next day the queen mentioned it again. Wouldn't the old jester be happier away from the trials and pressures of court? she asked, slipping through the fissure in his field of vision, and the jester knew what he had to do.

The spell broker kept himself secret, but the jester knew where to find him in the twilit side of the city. "My magic is gone," the jester said.

"Else why would you be here?" the broker said, and displayed brown teeth in a round white face shaved smooth as an egg. "Let me look at you."

The jester kept himself still as the spell broker plucked a strand of his hair and burned it over a candle, traced the outline of his ribs, smelled his breath, looked into his eyes and ears. "What is it you want?" the broker said upon finishing his inspection.

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"The safety of my brother." The jester had heard stories about the deviousness of the spell broker. It was best not to be too specific too soon.

"Safety. Magic cannot guarantee safety. Magic can sometimes kill a threat, perhaps redirect it. Forgetting-magic is the easiest, though, and the surest."

She could forget, the jester thought. It made him inexplicably sad, though, the idea of court whispers: the queen, forget? She of the searchlight mind and unshakable will, the gray eyes like stones that held within them memories of each and every soul who passed by?

I will protect my brother.

"Forgetting magic, yes," the jester said. "If it is the easiest, it must come cheaply."

"The cheapest magic comes dear," said the broker.

"Name your price."

"Your eye."

"Very well," the jester said, and in a sudden panic thought *too soon, spoke too soon*, because the broker was still speaking, and the words out of his mouth were, "Your left eye."

My good eye, the jester thought. How will I look on the queen?

But his mouth was already open saying yes.

He found he could look upon the queen, after a fashion. If he positioned himself correctly, she would, on her way to kiss the king, walk through the part of his world that had not faded to a lifeless fog. He could not see her clearly, only well enough to remember how she had once appeared to him.

Well enough.

I did this for you, he would whisper sometimes under his breath. *So you would not feel betrayed when you discovered what I have done for my brother.*

In the jester's thirty-seventh year, when the dog his brother was thirty-three, the king had retired him from acrobatics, and the jester passed his days in excremental assaults on courtiers even as he kept his head turned slightly away to the left of the queen. The court thought him blind in the right eye instead of the left, and grudgingly credited him for his seemly deference to the queen's presence. They imagined that this

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deference arose out of gratitude at being permitted to remain at court, and the queen's stature increased among the aristocratic gossips, her reputation for kindness burnishing the well-known brilliance of her mind and the much-praised symmetry of her face. She often stooped to pet the old dog, who would thump his tail against the leg of the throne at her approach.

The jester kept his secrets, and he was careful around the children. The broker's spell made no guarantee against the queen's remembering. If he pitied himself from time to time, he ran his fingers where the queen's had been, along the dog his brother's neck, and he said to himself, unable to stop: *One lives in one's world*, he said to the sleeping dog. *One lives in one's world*.

4

THE BOY STILL SLEPT. But Will had come in from outside. "You're not blind," he said.

"I'm not a dog, either," Paulus said. He set Will's copy of the Book aside.

Will lit his pipe. "Twice someone spent their magic on you?"

"Aye," Paulus said. "Twice."

"And how did the second come about?"

"You wouldn't believe me," Paulus said.

"Already I don't believe you," Will said. "Tell another one."

"My brother confessed to the queen and as a reward for the laughter he had brought to the court, she bought me back my shape as a man, on the condition that I enter the king's service. I fought eleven years in the king's wars, and then he sent me to kill the dragon. When I came back, my brother and the king had both died, and I was released. Since then I have been for hire."

Will blew smoke rings over the sleeping boy. "All of this after you tried to kill the king? Ha," he said. "I wish that was true. No, I don't."

Three times, actually, Paulus thought. The forgetting he'd bought four years ago in The Fells was the third. Paulus made an occasional pastime of imagining who that little bit of magic had come from: a gambler needing to cover a debt, a soldier wanting a woman, a merchant whose

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cargo had foundered in the straits. Perhaps even the woman who had borne this child who might be his. The brokers of The Fells moved through the hamlets and farms of the mountains, following the lucrative scents of poverty and desperation. Their prices weren't fair, but even a rapacious deal often made the difference between feeding children and selling them.

"Three years ago?" he asked.

"Four, in the fall."

"How?"

Will shrugged. "She was bringing water. Sat down for a rest beside the path, I guess, and I found her when I heard the boy crying. Maybe six months old, he was."

Could be, Paulus thought. The sleeping boy was curled on his side, arms drawn in under his chin, still shadowed from the sunlight falling through the hut's single window. Firelight glowed in the tangles of his hair. Paulus thought he might see something of himself in the shape of the boy's shoulders, the line of his jaw.

Today I must kill Myros, he thought. Because if I do not, I will have to kill this boy, and I cannot.

"Have you named him? Had she?"

"She called him after you," Will said. "So I did, too."

Paulus was brimful and shattering. A boy with my name, he thought. After all this, all the leavings and the years with no place to call my own, in my fiftieth year I ride out on a mission of killing and find a boy with my name.

It was written in the Book: *Let the Lesson be.*

He stood, and his knees cracked. "Today this ends," Paulus said. "One way or another. If the boy asks for me, tell him I will return by nightfall or not at all."

The boy. Still, Paulus admonished himself, you cannot call him by his name?

He walked the final steps of his Agate Tower errand, his body leading him to the dragon's cave as if his scars were lines on a map. It would have taken Myros some time to prepare the spell to control the dragon, and more time yet for him to gather his courage and enter the cave when the dragon did not come out. Quite a string of surprises Myros was in for, Paulus thought, and bared his teeth as he wound up a switchbacking footpath that ended on the ridge above the cave. He made no effort to

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disguise his presence. If Myros had already spent his energy on the spell, then he was just another baby turtle; if he had not, Paulus was in for a hard fight, but on this day he would kill no man from behind. He crested the ridge and closed his eyes, riding out a wave of memories. The cave mouth, like a half-lidded eye, was the same, yet it seemed smaller to him; the smell of the snow on the north side of the ridge made him think of ice storms rattling against a window with a sound like the rasp of the dragon's scales.

They were all before him now, the specters of those gone from his life: his brother, Andrew, his mother, the king. Men he had served with. Joy. And the boy she had named for him.

When Paulus opened his eyes, Myros was looking at him from the cave entrance. "For this you made me kill children," Paulus said.

"I made you do nothing," Myros said, and made a gesture with his ringed hand.

Paulus was alight with pain: every blade that had ever cut him cut him anew. He felt the teeth of dogs and the dragon's talons, the piercing of an arrow and the grate of a spearpoint across his skull. Thumbs gouged at his eyes, and bootheels ground his fingers. He dropped his sword and felt his knees buckle. Blood roared in his ears, and somewhere beyond it he heard Myros' footsteps on the stones of the trail. Looking up through tears, he saw the apprentice coming nearer. You misjudge me, Paulus thought, and drank of his pain until it had given him strength to stand, and when he had gotten to his feet he left his sword where it lay and fell upon Myros with bare hands.

When it was done, he lay gasping on the stony ground as the apprentice's spell slowly faded from his body. He felt as if he was being knit together again, and when the pain had faded into the leaden dullness that for Paulus always followed killing, he got to his feet. Leaving his sword where it lay, he walked a short distance into the cave, to the point where the light from without finally failed. Trailing away into the dark, the bones of the dragon had already begun taking on the color of the stones around them.

One more, Paulus remembered thinking. I was right, and I was wrong.

It was afternoon when he returned to Will's farm. The boy was on his hands and knees following an insect through the beaten grass. He looked

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up at Paulus' approach and stood. "There's a beetle there," he said.

Paulus knew in that moment how little he understood of children, and how enormous his task was. "Your name is Paulus. Is that right?" he asked.

The boy nodded, but his attention was already wandering back to the beetle. He parted the grasses looking for it.

"My name is Paulus too."

The boy looked over his shoulder at Paulus. Where, Paulus wondered? A place without wizards. A place without these bargains driven for your soul. A place where my boy will not follow my path. He realized he had forgotten his sword, and resolved that he would never wear another. Let the Lesson be.

"You're going to come with me," Paulus said.

And the boy said, "Where are we going?" ✍

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FILMS

DAVID J. SKAL

PERFUME: THE STORY OF A MURDERER

THE WORD "synesthesia" signifies a confusion of the senses — a fascinating phenomenon often associated with psychedelic states in which one can taste music, for instance, or visualize smell. In the latter regard, the long-awaited film version of Patrick Süskind's 1985 bestseller *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* qualifies as synesthetic cinema of an ambitious order, using every filmmaker's trick short of Smell-o-Vision or Odorama to convince an audience that it's actually smelling something onscreen, or at least identifying with a protagonist who can smell things no mortal has ever sniffed before.

Long considered unfilmable (no less a filmmaker than Stanley Kubrick is said to have thrown up his hands at the very thought of the task), ten million euros for the screen rights to *Perfume* seems to have been incentive enough for Süskind to come to all of his senses and allow director Tom Tykwer *(Run, Lola, Run)* to craft an impressive, if in many ways problematic, photoplay.

Both novel and film tell the vampirish tale of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille (the surname means frog), "one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages." Born barely alive in the stinking squalor of a Paris fish market in 1738, Grenouille is possessed of a superhuman olfactory sense, while personally possessing no corporeal scent. Since nature famously discriminates against vacuums, Grenouille compensates by obsessively studying and collecting all the scents of the world, a self-taught activity that leads him, inexorably

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(how else, in a story like this?), to become the apprentice of a flamboyantly has-been master perfumer, under whose selfish tutelage he learns the basic techniques of scent distillation in a crumbling mansion precariously perched on a bridge over the Seine. With Grenouille's help, the perfumer regains his former glory, only to be killed when his structurally challenged house unceremoniously collapses into the river.

With sexual maturation Grenouille becomes acutely aware of female scents. He accidentally kills a young woman he has stalked, and, having had the opportunity to appreciate the intoxicating aroma of her corpse, fully realizes the meaning and purpose of his life. Grenouille rapidly becomes a serial killer with bloodhound-ish instincts rivaling those of Hannibal Lecter. He moves to the perfume center of Grasse in the south of France, and there applies the advanced techniques of scent capture to the task of distilling, alongside his day job, an ultimate, elusive fragrance stolen from the corpses of virginal women.

With each murder he compounds and intensifies the mystical scent, finally incorporating it into his very being. He becomes a monster both messianic and misanthropic. When captured by the authorities and sentenced to die, he unleashes the fragrance, which brings the men and women of Grasse to their adoring knees, followed by a public orgy unprecedented in human history. The traumatized townsfolk completely erase from consciousness Grenouille, his crimes, and most important, their own transgressions. His life's work complete, Grenouille returns to Paris, dousing himself with the last of the perfume in order to be summarily cannibalized by a mob who believe they are acting out of love.

Whew. Or, perhaps just whiff. *Perfume* is a manipulative knockout as a novel, especially on first exposure to the masterful English translation by John E. Woods. The narrative moves with the concentrated intensity of a fairy tale, demanding much — perhaps too much — suspension of disbelief along the way. On first reading, the story seems to be a profound allegory, but repeated visits raise the question: an allegory of what? Grenouille has been persuasively (however contradictorily) interpreted by critics as alternately representing Hitler and Christ (to be kind to Hitler and Christ, Dracula has suffered a similar critical fate). His

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mad experiments distinctly evoke the Frankenstein/Faust mythos. It's also a sick study of unrequited love and obsessive over-idealization, suggesting Goethe and Young Werther. Delving further into Germanic folklore, the scent-free Grenouille echoes aspects of Peter Schlemihl, the man who famously lost his shadow.

But after two or three readings, the novel's ultimate meaning is ambiguous at best. The mythic aspects of the tale are at essential odds with Süskind's prodigious historical research, which is mesmerizing. Who outside the hermetically sealed world of perfumers ever thought about how perfume was actually made? Or how fascinating the real process could be? Once Süskind pulls us into his authoritatively smelly web, we're prepared to believe almost anything. Following a strategy Bram Stoker chose in the composition of *Dracula*, the narrative is loaded with enough convincing historical detail to sell a fantastic premise.

No doubt about it, Grenouille is indeed a vampire, however allegorical. Blood lust is metaphorically displaced as smell-lust. Grenouille's lack of a personal scent — he apparently is some kind of a living, breathing stick of Right Guard, which gives him a certain invisiblity in an overpoweringly odorous world — parallels the vampire's traditional missing shadow or reflection. Stoker could have learned a few things from Süskind in terms of building his vampire's character — imagine the possibilities of Dracula's disgust at the human race and his shackled dependence upon it — but it is just this kind of interiorized characterization that made *Perfume* such a difficult film property, and probably would have hobbled *Dracula*'s media life as well.

Perfume is reportedly the most expensive feature ever produced in Germany. Frank Griebe's cinematography is, shot-by-shot, drop-dead gorgeous, and that's not necessarily a compliment. Arguably, a grittier approach would have better evoked the unpleasant pungency of eighteenth-century France, where perfumes routinely compensated for well-documented deficits in personal hygiene. Instead of trying endlessly to conjure the look and feel of upscale cosmetics commercials, the filmmakers could have been a bit more forthcoming in documenting the unpalatable sights and smells of a time when people sometimes sewed themselves into progressively ripe finery instead of bathing, and caulked

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their unsightly smallpox scars with grotesquely thick white lead makeup (eliminated, of course, from the censoriously flattering oil portraits of the time). Where are the universally reeking chamber pots? The open sewers? Food rotting in the absence of refrigeration? Flies and bugs spreading contagion everywhere? What of the legendary, pervasive foulness of the Parisian charnel houses and cemeteries? And, for that matter, where are everyone's festering, stinking dental abscesses? Cheap perfumes were undoubtedly used as mouthwash in those days, not to mention their obvious utility as the chamber-pot equivalent of Ty-D-Bowl. I would have liked *Perfume* to have risen to a grotesque level of hyper-surrealism that escapes the film as produced. David Cronenberg, where were you?

The olfactory brain reels at the missed, sick-making cinematic opportunities (which, admittedly, would have done little at the multiplexes to promote the sale of rancid popcorn). Using visual imagery alone, *Perfume*'s creative team does manage to convey the ambient nausea of the Paris fish market, and does admirable back flips in its other efforts to represent smell indirectly. If I am not mistaken, there is at least one nearly subliminal P.O.V. shot from inside Grenouille's infant nose, even before he's shed his umbilical cord. That certainly constitutes going the extra yard.

Throughout the novel, Grenouille is described as ugly, though no one can say exactly what aspect of his person repels. Here, Süskind may well be paying infamous homage to Stevenson's Edward Hyde, who had much the same problem. But even Süskind waffles on this matter; late in the book Grenouille is described as both lame and hunchbacked. Ben Whishaw, while not a conventional cover boy, has no such issues (the actor effectively impersonated Keith Richards in 2005's *Stoned*). However, the director, screenwriters, and performer have chosen to subvert the novelist's conception of Grenouille at every turn. Süskind takes us obsessively into the character's every perception, emphasizing his gnawing misanthropy and swelling megalomania. When I first read the novel, the young Peter Lorre immediately sprang to mind as an ideal if impossible casting choice. Whishaw comes across as an inarticulate savant who can flare his nostrils sensuously, but never lets us in on his deepest thoughts or intentions.

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John Hurt's episodic narration, taken directly from the book, is a stilted device, though perhaps the perfect stratagem for a film already walking dangerously on stilts. If only there had been more of it. Additional narration would have done much to complement Whishaw's performance and deepen our understanding of the character.

One may forgive Dustin Hoffman, an indelibly American film icon if there ever was one, for not being entirely convincing as an eighteenth century Italian transplanted to Paris. Nonetheless, he steals the show as Guiseppe Baldini, the faded master perfumer whose fortunes are reinvigorated by Grenouille's preternatural talent. Bewigged and berouged when not outright bewildered by the new tricks Grenouille teaches him, Hoffman's showboating performance is carefully calibrated just at the edge of camp, never sailing over, and the whole sequence of Grenouille's apprenticeship emerges as a film-within-a-film, with its own sturdy beginning, middle, and end.

One can imagine an alternate, and, perhaps, more satisfying, version of the screenplay in which Baldini lingers around until nearly the end, increasingly aware of Grenouille's monstrous crimes and his own complicity. The viewer is drawn to Baldini because he is motivated by ordinary human foibles like pride and greed. Grenouille, in the film, is highly perplexing, even to modern audiences spoon-fed from the cradle with a myriad of mediagenic sociopaths and serial killers. The collapse of Baldini's house on the bridge is a digital *coup de théâtre* with the kind of dramatic finality that should have been saved for the film's true climax.

The final scenes create all manner of problems, which pile upon each other annoyingly. As Grenouille's final victim, Rachel Hurd-Wood shows more spunk than her predecessors and for a while we wonder if she will be the triumphant "last girl" à la slasher film protocol. Alas, no. As her father, Alan Rickman possesses a physiognomy so similar to Dustin Hoffman's that we can't help but wonder how he would have fared as Baldini (probably pretty well). And how, for instance, does Grenouille manage to preserve the last flacon of the ultimate perfume while being stripped, shackled, tortured, and moved from cell to cell? Süskind's fairy-tale logic fares less well on the screen than on the page.

And there are, sadly, more missteps toward the end of the film. A

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rapid-fire sequence in which a succession of women are snatched from the streets of Grasse is unintentionally comic, and provoked titters at the screening I attended. The scenes in which Grenouille slathers animal fat on the nude corpses of his victims to extract their smells are intended to be necrophile-sensuous, but end up just schmaltzy in the most literal, unsentimental use of the word. Director Tykwer then drops the ball badly for the orgy, staged disappointingly as a tepid, '60s-style love-in, with no sense of the townspeople's horror and denial in confronting their own frenzied animalism. In the novel, Grenouille's self-sacrificial death is depicted as a cannibal attack straight out of *Suddenly, Last Summer*. "...the human body is tough and not easily dismembered, even horses have great difficulty accomplishing it...[Grenouille] was divided into thirty pieces, and every animal in the pack snatched a piece for itself, and then, driven by voluptuous lust, dropped back to devour it. A half-hour later, Jean Baptiste Grenouille had disappeared utterly from the earth." The film, however, opts for tasteful, stylized choreography with no graphic violence. The townspeople cover Grenouille in a tightly controlled circle, diving in like politely synchronized swimmers from an Esther Williams musical.

Sometimes less is more, but sometimes more is better.

Like the novel, *Perfume* the movie impresses at first but falters upon subsequent reflection, rather like a vampire too often exposed to daylight. And yet, despite a running time approaching two and a half hours, the film never bores, riveting the viewer's attention from moment to moment in a manner synesthetically consistent with its literary source. Which, given the ignominious fates of so many other novels consigned to the dream factory, might be something for which we all should be grateful.

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Sheila Finch has written about a dozen stories concerning the Lingsters, including a passel of short stories and the novels Triad *and* Reading the Bones. *She has recently assembled the Lingster short stories into one volume which is due to be published soon under the title* The Guild of Xenolinguists. *In the process of assembling the book, she was inspired to go back to the beginning and write the story about how it all started — and she was pleased to find out that it didn't quite originate in the way she'd always thought. We think you'll also be pleased to see how the guild originated.*

First Was the Word

By Sheila Finch

JAMAL LENANA PAUSED, his breath rasping. The ascent was harder than he'd expected. The antigrav lift-belt he'd let the cute shop assistant talk him into purchasing in Moshi at the foot of Kilimanjaro seemed to be an expensive fake; he was doing most of the work instead of the other way around. *When you gonna learn, bro*? he thought. *Always a sucker for the ladies.*

Stupid to attempt this in the sweltering temperatures of September, with or without a working lift-belt. A month ago, he'd been finishing up his Ph.D. in Linguistics at UC Berkeley. At the last minute, the committee had balked at his ideas about the emergence of language, something so fundamentally driven by biology he'd made the outrageous suggestion it might even control the development of alien languages — if humans ever had the luck to meet any. So he'd walked out, leaving his dissertation and his career on the seminar table, and gone to Africa.

Mopping his brow, he turned his attention back to Kilimanjaro's snow-covered peak. At least another couple of hours to the top, but unless

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the antigrav belt worked as advertised, he wasn't going to make it. He'd come up a long way from the scrub plateau of the plains, through the lower, cultivated slopes and the cloud forest, and had reached a more open section of grassy moor, yet he seemed to be only halfway. The incense of desert country laced with the wild scent of animals rose up to his sensitive nose. This might be Mother Africa, he thought, but there was too much American in his African blood for him to be comfortable with the fierce sun so near the equator. Getting to the caldera at the top of Kilimanjaro was rapidly losing its charm.

His gaze was caught by a dark bird circling on a thermal. Vulture, maybe, scanning for fresh kill. It flew toward him, following the path up the mountain. It grew bigger, and he could see it was a helicopter, not a bird.

The craft, painted a dull, unreflective black, made an almost silent approach. It bore no markings or identification of any kind. Now he could see the pilot and another man beside him — and if he hadn't known better, he'd have thought the chopper's occupants were looking for him.

"Dr. Lenana?" the craft's PA boomed.

The chopper settled to the ground a few feet away. The blades slowed, stopped. A man in boots and a camouflage flight suit with no identifying patches slid down from the open hatch and gazed at him.

"You are Dr. Jamal Lenana?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Come with us, please."

He shook his head. "You're looking for someone else, bro."

The man, with a bony face and tight mouth that looked as if it didn't waste much energy smiling, adjusted dark glasses. "We were sent to find you specifically, Dr. Lenana."

Damn RFIDs and GPS and the rest of the surveillance alphabet, he thought. Too easy to find anybody anywhere these days. It had to be bad news about his father. The old man would be almost ninety by now, and they hadn't spoken in years. Lenana Senior had retired from the army as a two-star general and gone to work for the NSA. He had connections with the defense and intelligence gathering communities; he must've asked old friends to find his son.

"Please. We're wasting time."

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Jamal was tempted to tell them where to go with their request. But it was hot, his muscles were complaining, he was tired of trail mix and hungry for real food, and he could always experience Kilimanjaro in VR. It had been a whim anyway, born in a fit of anger when he realized what he'd done to his career. The pilot leaned out the door and extended his hand. Jamal took it and climbed in. The pilot indicated a seat, then adjusted the safety harness. There were no identifying patches or insignia on his flight suit either. The first man climbed in behind him.

"Going to tell me what this is all about?"

"Your dissertation's on the universal biological roots of language, isn't it, Dr. Lenana?"

"It's not 'Doctor' Lenana. This some kind of joke or what?" Since when did esoteric linguistics become important to guys who spent their time in unmarked uniforms and stealth craft?

"No joke, sir." The man's mouth moved as if it were about to smile, then thought better of it. "I understand your work is potentially valuable, given the times we live in."

"I'm a theoretical linguist. There are plenty of talented translators coming out of the Defense Language Institute in Monterey. Enough to deal with any language or dialect around the world." Especially terrorist ones, he thought, the hot topic when he'd started graduate school. The old man had argued — unsuccessfully — if his youngest child and only son was going to move to the West Coast, he should go to DLI.

"Suppose we're dealing with a language that we've not encountered before? Hypothetically, of course," the man added.

Absurd. There were no more undiscovered languages hiding in unexplored jungles on the planet. Come to that, there were hardly any more jungles. "Not interested."

"I'm sorry, sir," the man said. "I can't tell you any more than that. You'll be briefed as soon as we land at Fort Meade."

"I have to admit, Jamal, we haven't seen anything quite like this before."

The man whose sixth-floor office in Maryland he'd been ushered into was someone he'd known in his childhood. Tom Wang had often been a guest in the Lenana home in the Baltimore suburbs, one of the crowd of

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young NSA agents with hazy backgrounds and obscure career descriptions that Miriam Lenana took pleasure in feeding. He remembered Tom Wang in particular, seated on a straight-backed chair under the portrait of Jamal's great-grandfather as a Tuskegee Airman, always laughing at some lame joke Jamal's father made. Even as a boy, he'd recognized a kiss-up when he saw one.

Older now, heavier, black hair fading to silver, Wang had gained deep furrows in his brow. Unlike Jamal's escorts, he wore an exquisite suit, a pale blue shirt, and a slightly darker tie. He perched informally on the edge of a walnut desk as if to set his visitor at ease. Jamal wasn't fooled. The office had an ambience of comfort and informality — sprawling plants in corners, framed prints of sailboats on the wall — that seemed designed to cover a more ominous purpose. Behind Wang, a long window gave a view of the vast parking lot of the NSA compound. The windows were sealed, the pinewoods scent in the room coming from an air freshener his nose identified though his eyes couldn't find it.

Jamal was tired from the journey and short on patience right now. He'd never had much liking for either intelligence gathering or what the military had become since his great-grandfather's day. "Mind telling me why the NSA thinks I'd be interested in working for them?"

"Please, sit down." Wang indicated two armchairs on either side of a faux fireplace. "I'll have someone bring us coffee and then we'll talk."

When the coffee arrived, a young intern set the tray on a low table. Jamal made eye contact with her and she smiled. Coppery hair in a short, bouncy cut and bright blue eyes. Nice perfume, too. Sweet deal to have eye candy like that on your staff, he thought, watching her pour the coffee. From the deliberate way she bent over, letting her white silk blouse drape away from tanned cleavage, he knew she was aware of his attention, enjoying it.

Wang waited until she left the room.

"We have here a puzzle," Wang began. "Three days ago, a couple of Maryland State Troopers picked up a vagrant, a man they'd found stark naked on Highway 95 just outside DC. He didn't respond to English. As the law orders, they called in interpreters. They expected he'd speak a European language, German, or perhaps Russian or something Scandinavian — logical, considering his blond features. When that didn't work,

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they put out a call for speakers of languages with smaller speaker pools like Basque and Amharic. They got the same lack of result every time."

"They tried sign?"

Wang nodded. "Again, nothing."

"Mentally impaired."

Wang hesitated as if he were weighing how much information to share. "Probably not in this case."

Jamal shook his head. "Country's full of homeless people — half of them totally nuts. Maybe the troopers just found another one."

Wang had the grace to look uncomfortable, Jamal thought, confirming that he was withholding information.

"The secretary wants an answer ASAP," Wang said.

"There're still a few languages left in the world with only a handful of speakers. It's possible to find something nobody in Maryland speaks, surely?"

"If that were all."

"The DLI ought to be up to the job of figuring out the language of a vagrant. Why not pull them in?" *And I'm outta here,* he thought. Last thing he wanted was to get involved with the NSA. And secretaries giving orders — what was that all about? "I don't get why the cops can't solve their own problems. Overkill, isn't it, bringing in the NSA?"

"Maybe not in this case," Wang said. "I'd like to hear what you think."

"My dissertation's on how languages evolve, not how to speak any of them."

Wang nodded. "I've followed your career ever since those early days when your mother used to feed the starving junior agents. Brilliant piece of speculation, I'm told. Something about 'universal bionecessities' — I think that was your term? — driving language evolution."

"That's all it was, speculation."

Wang set his coffee aside and stood up. "Let's take a look downstairs before we decide."

Wang held up a palm to an armed guard who scanned it briefly, then opened the heavy door into an interrogation room. Jamal saw a long metal table holding a plastic water jug and a wrapped supply of plastic glasses,

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two chairs positioned on one side of the table, one on the other, and a large mirror. There was an absence of smell in the recycled air of the room that struck him as more artificial than the air freshener in Wang's office. A young man who'd been in the room nodded at them and left.

His first view of the stranger took his breath away. *My God! It's Michelangelo's David!*

The man who stood staring into the mirror — which Jamal belatedly realized was probably one-way — was probably seven feet tall, and dressed in a T-shirt and sweat pants too short for his long legs. His feet were bare. His body was well muscled, but like a dancer, not a weightlifter, his skin golden; his hair was white-gold and almost luminous. The guy was stunning. Prenatal genetic tinkering was advanced these days, but Jamal doubted it could produce results like this.

"Our doctors did a preliminary, non-invasive examination when he arrived here yesterday," Wang said. "X-ray and MRI revealed no injuries that might account for the unresponsiveness. There were some anomalies, slight, but rather puzzling. There's something — let's call it not quite normal — about him. He scored high on nonverbal intelligence tests but he doesn't — or won't — speak."

The stranger was the most fantastic specimen of male humanity he'd ever seen. If he was human. Jamal thought suddenly of rumors he'd heard about secret medical labs on the East Coast producing experimental chimeras and hybrids, weapons for the ongoing defense effort. He'd never taken the rumors seriously.

Then the stranger turned and looked at him. His eyes were a pale, almost silver gray; it was hard to meet their gaze, but Jamal forced himself to do so. Some intelligence leaped the gap between them like a jolt of electricity, and he took an involuntary half-step back.

"How long have you had him?"

"At Fort Meade? Almost twenty-four hours."

Abruptly aware of the one-way mirror and the potential presence of observers, he demanded, "Is he a prisoner?"

"No, no. He's in custody for his own protection, until we know more about him."

Both men stared at the improbably perfect individual whose gaze never wavered. *Something about him* — Jamal felt a shiver of excitement

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run down his spine. Instinctively, he reverted to *Homo sapiens'* oldest language, gesture. In the harsh light of the interrogation room, he held his right hand up above shoulder level, fingers splayed, palm facing the stranger, sending the nonverbal message: *Hail. No threat.*

No response. Yet he had the impression his gesture had been understood, but the stranger had not felt a need to respond — Or as if Jamal should've known he wasn't a threat without being told — Or at least, he could be a threat but didn't choose to —

His mind reeled with complexities he couldn't have explained to Wang and wasn't about to try. Already he was aware of some kind of subliminal bond forming between himself and the stranger: *Us and the NSA.*

He fought it. "You've got yourself a problem. But I don't see how it involves me."

"We need your help. We may be looking at a biological construct of some kind." Wang hesitated, again seeming to weigh how much information to share with Jamal. "Not one of ours. We want to know who sent him to us."

Jamal absorbed that information for a moment. So the rumors were true — and not only the United States was doing it. Something about the idea of creating life in the human image didn't sit right with him; too many Sunday mornings fidgeting beside his mother in a stiflingly hot Baptist church had left their mark.

"I told you, I'm a theorist. I don't do fieldwork. And I sure as hell don't work for the intelligence community or the military."

"I'm not asking you to. But you come from a military family. And we need a linguist with an open mind, someone who's creative, not afraid to speculate."

It went against his principles, but at the same time there was no way he could pass up an opportunity to work with this mysterious stranger. At the very least he might get a paper out of it for one of the professional journals, damage control for his self-sabotaged career.

"There's one more thing you should know," Wang said. "When the troopers found him on the highway, he suddenly appeared. One moment the road was empty. The next, he was there."

He reluctantly dragged his attention away from the stranger and stared at Wang.

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"We have no technology to do that," Wang added. "We didn't think anyone else did either."

AT TEN MINUTES to six the next morning, Jamal sat at a desk with an untouched pastry and a cooling cup of coffee in front of him, thinking about the problem he'd been handed. He'd slept fitfully last night, although Wang had instructed the cute intern to find him a comfortable room and arrange for his meals.

If the U.S.A. — and everybody else, including its enemies, according to Wang — was incapable of creating a bioconstruct that could appear out of thin air, then what were they looking at? Wang had dodged the question when he'd asked after they left the interrogation room.

Whatever the explanation for the stranger's origins, the problem remained how to plan a series of language lessons. Nothing in his course work at Berkeley had prepared him for this. *You dropped yourself right into this one, bro,* he told himself. The dissertation that so defiantly claimed to know a way to decipher the basics of just about any language that turned up in the galaxy was going to be put to the test.

Pulling out the small keyboard he found in the desk drawer, he typed in his code. Immediately, a flat screen rose out of the desk, displaying the home page of his personal desk computer back in Berkeley. He accessed the dissertation and scrolled rapidly through, looking for anything that might be useful, pulling it out and sending it to the nearby printer.

Well, he amended half an hour later, he hadn't actually promised to be able to do it, just that it was theoretically possible. The committee hadn't been impressed. This morning, staring at his words on the screen, he wasn't impressed either.

Where did that leave him?

There were no undiscovered tribes with unknown languages left on Earth, so no call for people doing original fieldwork anymore. The last linguist who'd done that died almost a century ago. And he was too impatient to enjoy spending hours making recordings of ancient native speakers, last of their tribe or whatever. That was why he'd gone into theoretical linguistics. But he knew how it was done in the old days; he'd taken the first step yesterday with his gesture of greeting.

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A knock on the door disturbed him. Wang's red-haired intern put her head around the door. A faint whiff of a floral perfume with darker notes entered with her.

"Did you need anything, sir? It's my job to take care of you."

He sized her up. She was young, early twenties he guessed, with a fresh-faced innocence. But there was a hint of sauciness to her that lent more than one meaning to her words. He guessed she was one of those groupies hooked on the aura of power that surrounded the important men she worked for. How far would that power addiction go, he wondered? He had the impression she wouldn't turn him down if he put the moves on her. But for the moment he was preoccupied with the stranger.

"Maybe later."

"I'll keep it in mind," she said, winking at him. "By the way, my name's Corinne."

When she'd gone, he looked back at the notes he'd printed out. Useless. He crumpled them up and tossed them into the recycling chute under the desk. This was a situation that called for playing from his strength, what his thesis committee had dismissively called intuition. Nothing wrong with intuition, but he preferred the stronger image of flying by the seat of his pants, like his great-grandfather. He opened the door.

The man who stood outside was dark-eyed and ascetic-looking with a shaved head; he seemed as if he'd be more at home in a priest's collar than the impeccably tailored gray suit and tie he was wearing.

"'Morning, sir." The man saluted him with precision that spoke of a military background. Light in the hallway struck a small reflection from the tiny comm unit he wore on his lapel.

"Guarding me against the enemy?"

The man smiled. "I'm here to assist you, sir, and to guide you through the maze of corridors in this building in case you don't remember the way. Whoever the architect was, he had a sense of humor. The name's Glenys, Aldo Glenys."

"Interesting combination."

"My father was Welsh, but I grew up in Switzerland with my mother's family."

They shook hands. Aldo Glenys was maybe ten years older than he

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was. Jamal sensed something cool and focused in the man. Not your ordinary career soldier or intelligence agent, he thought; more like the NSA was doing its recruiting at the seminaries these days.

"You said, 'assist.' Are you a linguist?"

"Only in the amateur sense of the word, sir. Language has long been a hobby of mine. I taught myself to speak several."

"And Latin's one?" He caught a flicker of surprise in Glenys's eyes and added, "Just a guess."

"A good one," Glenys agreed.

Score one for me, he thought and let it go; he had other things to think about.

"The interrogation room is equipped for both video and audio recording, fully automated. You won't see the equipment, but it's there," Glenys told him. "We'll be analyzing every word you can coax out of him."

"That important, huh?"

Glenys glanced at him, his expression neutral. They made their way through corridors of closed, unmarked doors, past uniformed receptionists who recognized Glenys and waved them through, until they arrived at the door of the room he'd visited last night. Another armed guard stood on duty.

"Necessary security, sir," Glenys said. "We don't know what we're dealing with yet."

"And when we do?"

Glenys presented his palm to the sensor pad and didn't answer.

When they entered, they found the tall stranger with his back to the one-way mirror which at the moment had morphed itself into a glowing portrait of a tranquil river meadow with lots of trees. Maybe the stranger knew there was someone behind the glass and that was why he'd turned his back. Jamal wondered uneasily if those odd silver eyes could see through the one-way glass. Today the visitor's gray shirt and sweat pants outfit was almost the right size; it looked as if it had been borrowed from someone in the NBA. His feet were still bare.

There were two other men in the room, one blond, one — slightly older — dark-haired, both wearing dark suits; they had arranged folding chairs along one wall. They acknowledged his arrival with brief nods but didn't identify themselves.

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The stranger obviously wasn't a normal human, so he had to be a bioconstruct — even if Jamal personally found it hard to believe any lab was capable of creating one, and no matter how he arrived on the highway in front of the troopers.

"Did this guy spend the night in here?" he asked.

The two NSA agents didn't move a facial muscle.

"He has a room normally occupied by a junior grade agent," Glenys said. "Do you see a problem?"

Jamal shook his head. "Forget it."

The agents were an annoyance. He didn't feel comfortable enough with his assignment to want witnesses. "I'll ask you gentlemen to keep your thoughts to yourselves while I work," he told them. "I do this my way or not at all."

One of the agents — the blond one — nodded. The other stared past Jamal.

How was he going to start the session? "Bionecessity," his dissertation called it, the need for an intelligent organism to control its environment through the assignment of symbols to objects, and to manipulate the symbols according to a set of strict rules governing the play of objects, causes, and goals. Physiology and environment affected world view. Whatever they were dealing with here, the stranger resembled normal humans closely enough: bipedal, opposable thumbs, air breather; he might come equipped with similar rules for language.

The stranger turned his face toward Jamal. There was an aura about him that inspired awe. Get the guy to Hollywood, Jamal thought, and there'd be a fortune to be made in VR. Maybe that's what they had in mind, whoever constructed him.

Time to get started. He indicated the table and patted the back of one of the chairs, then pantomimed sitting in it. He took the other chair and repeated the patting gesture. Aldo Glenys leaned against a wall, arms folded, watchful.

The stranger came over to the table.

"Sit down," Jamal said. He made a smile — universal sign of nonthreat among humans and primates and even some dogs — lips curving upward exposing teeth but not aggressively, skin at the corner of the eyes wrinkling. He hoped it truly was universal. If not, he might be very glad there were other people in the room with him.

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The visitor sat down but did not return the smile. He'd have to find something to call him besides "stranger" and "visitor," if only to keep his own thoughts straight. "Man" was obviously not right.

Long before they reached the stage of deep structure his dissertation had speculated about, they would have to rely on some pretty basic fieldwork stuff: Ostension, the oldest trick in the linguist's book.

He tapped his own breast with his right index finger. "Jamal."

Would one of those old-time fieldworkers have said "man" first, not his own name? He doubted it; that would have necessitated a distinction between man and non-man that even conversing with a lost, stone-age tribe of the Amazon wouldn't have required.

The visitor gazed unblinking at him.

"Jamal." He repeated the breast-tapping gesture. "Jamal."

"Jamal," the visitor said clearly.

Off to a good start, he thought. He reinforced the first lesson by repeating, "Jamal."

"Jamal," the visitor repeated.

His hand rose to take the second step, pointing at the visitor to elicit his name, then he paused. What if pointing was an insult — or worse — in the visitor's experience? His own grandmother, the Tuskegee pilot's daughter, had considered it rude to point. He saw now that far from being boring, fieldwork might well have been downright dangerous. It only succeeded because humans mostly forgave cultural faux pas in the beginning of a language exchange in return for understanding. There was a hunger for language in humans, but he couldn't assume that would be true here.

If he didn't take the risk they'd get nowhere. Careful to keep his arm relaxed, index finger loose, unthreatening, he slowly pointed at the other's breast, and waited.

Nothing.

Back to step one. Turning the finger toward himself, he said, "Jamal."

"Jamal," the visitor agreed. But no sound came from his lips when the finger was reversed.

Leaning back in his chair, Jamal thought about this for a moment. He was aware of Glenys quietly filling plastic tumblers from the plastic water

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jug. The two agents were busy keying notes into small e-pads. At least they were obeying his rules.

He needed the visitor to grasp the idea that he was supposed to furnish his own word for whatever Jamal pointed at, beginning with the one that signified personal identity. Maybe he could bypass the problem by shelving it for the moment. Language acquisition began with the naming of objects as well as self, the arbitrary signs that paired sound with image. Might as well work on vocabulary.

He put his finger on the table top. "Table."

"Table," the visitor gave him back.

The pronunciation was surprisingly flawless. He thought of his own stumbling attempts to master a few phrases in Swahili before his trip to Africa, and the amusement he'd caused the cute girl in the shop where he'd bought the defective antigrav belt.

"Chair," he said.

The visitor repeated the word. Then: mirror, floor, ceiling, wall, door, eye, hand, cup, water. All were successfully mastered. After an intense hour of this, he tried pointing to the objects and waiting. The visitor passed this test too, correctly naming each object indicated. So he was intelligent as well as beautiful, learning vocabulary faster than a normal human, baby or adult. Nor did he register any sign of strain from the exercise. But when Jamal tried to elicit the visitor's own word for an object he was met with silence.

Either he had no preexisting language — like Frankenstein's monster he was a *tabula rasa* — or he chose not to share his language with his teacher. And if that was the explanation for the absence of two-way communication, did it indicate something sinister? Elbows on the table, his chin leaning on his hands, Jamal gazed at the visitor. The visitor stared back. Waiting for the lesson to continue or playing some kind of game? He was frustrated by not being able to pin it down.

They could go on like this all day, creating a vocabulary of English words for everything in this room — all week, if they ventured outside. He decided to leap ahead. Human infants learned around thirteen thousand words before they entered school, but they learned something more useful too, the rules governing how to combine and recombine the words, a generative grammar that underpinned communication. It would take

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numerous repetitions, but ultimately the visitor must grasp the rule of names and actions if they were to move forward, and the distinctive *subject-verb-object* order that English used to portray them.

"Jamal," he said once more, pointing to himself. Then he stood up.

He was aware of the sudden, intense concentration of the two agents. What did they think he was going to do — attack?

"Stand," he said, identifying his action. He sat down again and repeated the rising action. "Stand. Jamal stand."

The inflected, third person singular ending, dinosaur that it was, could wait for another lesson. He figured it would slip out of the language one of these days anyway.

"Stand," the visitor said and got to his feet.

They followed this up with "Jamal" performing a variety of actions, sitting again, waving, clapping, drinking, all immediately understood and repeated by the visitor. Then he branched out, first reviewing the names of objects: Jamal, eye — then an action: close — finally putting one together with another for the combination of actor, action, and acted upon that was basic to English word order.

"Jamal close eye," he said, winking.

The visitor gazed at him for a moment till Jamal thought he'd moved too quickly from one concept to another and was about to retreat to something a bit simpler.

Then the visitor suddenly leaned over and seized Jamal's right hand in his own — the first time their flesh had made contact — bending the fingers down tight against the palm until they hurt.

"Jamal close hand," the visitor said.

He experienced a cold rush of fear. And something else, a blinding sense of *knowing*.

There was a blur of action; both agents shot to their feet. Glenys took a step forward. The visitor released Jamal's hand and Jamal waved them away, his heart racing.

Given the size of the visitor and his unknown powers, every bone in his hand might have been crushed. But more than that was the realization he *knew* what he was dealing with. Whatever he was, the visitor had recognized he'd been given a pattern and had adapted it correctly on the first try. That wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't possible he could've

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learned so fast — yet he just had. More disturbing was the realization the action had meaning on another, more metaphorical level. "Jamal close hand" signaled the end of the need for ostension.

This was more than a man-made bioconstruct. He couldn't prove it, but he was convinced he was dealing with something not from Earth. An alien.

Glenys coughed discreetly. "Everything all right so far, sir?"

"I think we're done for the morning," he said shakily.

Glenys nodded and opened the door. The two agents had returned to their folding chairs.

"This is one hell of a situation," he began as they went outside.

Glenys cocked his head warningly in the direction of the waiting guard.

His nerves still buzzed with the adrenaline jolt he'd received with that contact. It was freaking unbelievable, but how else to explain what he'd just experienced? It couldn't be explained — that was the point. But he *knew!* They were dealing with an extraterrestrial. Wang would think he was crazy if he reported that! So what? He'd already told them he didn't want to work for them. He didn't care what they thought. This was his opportunity. The professional journals would go nuts over the paper that was going to result from this experience.

He considered the implications of what had happened. As he understood it, a linguist discovered the subject's words and translated them into the language of the major culture, opening up the native's limited experience to the scrutiny of a wider world. The linguist had the skill and the knowledge to achieve that; the subject didn't. Later, the subject might learn the dominant language, but that was not the primary purpose of the enterprise. But this visitor had just turned the situation on its head — *he* was learning *Jamal's* language, not the other way around, a profound difference. How was he going to deal with an intelligence that obviously far exceeded his own?

"I think you might need a cup of coffee, sir," Glenys said as they retraced their path through the maze of corridors.

"I need something a lot stronger than coffee. And stop calling me 'sir' like some freaking Knight of the Round Table!"

Glenys smiled. "I heard you didn't appreciate being called 'Dr.

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Lenana' either. I have a car outside. Maybe you'd like to get away from the compound for lunch?"

"Damn straight!" He was still jittery with the magnitude of what had just happened and what it implied.

They retrieved Glenys's cream-colored Mercedes Helio and headed for the gate to the compound. Guards raised the barrier and waved them through. The Maryland countryside, turning gold with the approach of autumn, slid silently by. Neither of them spoke. Glenys finally pulled into the crowded parking lot of a small roadhouse whose sign advertised softshell crabs and cocktails.

"Civilians," Glenys noted. "They have the leisure time to take late lunches."

The interior was dim, wood-paneled, with appetizing, homey smells from an unseen barbecue pit. In the booth, Jamal ordered a steak sandwich from the menu pad inset into the tabletop; Glenys had the crab. They both ordered beer.

"Farm raised these days," Glenys commented when the server arrived with his plate of crabs. "But reasonable."

Like the beer glasses, the plates were the new plastic type; he'd been so monastic on the Berkeley campus he hadn't kept up with the latest inventions. *Better eat fast, bro,* he thought, or they'd disintegrate from under his sandwich. The steak might as well have been hamburger; he didn't pay attention to the taste. If he was right, the visitor was an alien. The alien's language ability was vastly superior to that of humans — and language was what humans did best. What might that imply for the future of human/alien relations? And he'd been the first person to make contact — if that's what had actually happened between them this morning.

"Interesting session," Glenys said when Jamal's silence stretched to minutes, an obvious invitation to speculate.

"What if this isn't something cooked up in a lab, Glenys?"

Glenys gazed at him. "Tom Wang is under a lot of pressure to discover who sent him to us as fast as possible."

"And if he isn't a bioconstruct?"

"There's an old saying among SETI warriors: If we meet the alien on his world, then we have the edge," Glenys observed. "But if the alien comes to us, then he's superior."

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The man's words penetrated his speeding thoughts. "You don't accept Wang's idea it's some enemy plot. You think he's an alien too."

"I like to keep an open mind."

Jamal absorbed this. This morning he'd been ready to feel morally superior to those who built human analogs. Now he was standing on the brink of something far more astounding — there really were aliens out there and he was supposed to communicate with one of them. "How superior must you be to come alone into hostile territory?"

"That's what you're expected to find out."

"What if I discover he's the scout for an invading horde from outer space?"

"In that case," Glenys said. "I guess Wang will order him eliminated."

And you're the guy elected to do it, aren't you? Jamal guessed.

Glenys ordered drink refills from the inset pad. After the server had set down the full glasses, retrieved the empties, and left again, he said, "We'll get a map of the sky. See if he'll identify home — *if* he's an alien."

"He's just too goddamned *perfect* to be human or anything humans could come up with. But he never reacts to anything. What's with that? Couple of times, I felt like leaning over and punching him, see if that got a reaction."

"Probably not a great idea," Glenys said lightly.

"I'm a theoretical linguist, Glenys. Way out of my depth."

"If you're right, humanity's going to be out of its depth from now on."

"Christ!" he said, swirling the lime wedge in his drink. Then he glanced up at his companion. "Sorry. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have a feeling — "

"Don't apologize. I started out in Geneva at a seminary, but I learned I was too worldly even for the Jesuits."

"Quite a jump to the NSA."

Glenys laughed. "Maybe not as far as you think."

The alcohol slid pleasantly through his body, relaxing his tense nerves. "Wang seems to be losing it. Told me his secretary wanted the answers."

"That's the Secretary of Defense," Glenys said.

On edge again, he stood up abruptly. "We need to get back."

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The two agents were still in the room when they got back. One hastily picked up the remains of what looked like a fast food meal, sweeping plates and cups from the interview table and stuffing them into a plastic bag that he handed out the door to the guard. Jamal wondered what the alien had eaten for lunch. He had to have eaten something; everything living had to find nourishment. Maybe the agents shared their cheeseburgers with him. With or without pickles?

For a second he felt hysterical laughter bubbling up and forced it back down. Anytime he allowed the thought to arise that he was dealing with a real extraterrestrial, he almost lost it. He needed to stay calm, in control of the situation.

The afternoon session proved to be no less astonishing than the morning one, and just as frustrating. The alien's ability to learn English was swift and accurate. Rarely did Jamal have to repeat a structure before the alien had it and made it his own. He had no doubt the alien understood everything he communicated to him. Yet all attempts to elicit words in the alien's own tongue were ignored. He felt the tug of competing emotions, awe, and a growing irritation. And cold fear when he thought of that moment this morning when the alien had seized his hand.

"Jamal stands and sees mirror," the alien said as Jamal demonstrated, proving his rapidly developing mastery of generative grammar.

The visitor had picked up the third person singular inflection from the brief bursts of human conversation around him. Unbelievable if Jamal hadn't experienced it for himself. Jamal judged it was time for a few pointers about determiners and prepositions. "Jamal sees *the* mirror *on the* wall."

The alien gazed at him without a flicker of expression. "The water fills the cup on the table."

In rapid fashion, Jamal demonstrated the usefulness of *in, out, up, down, with* and every other preposition he could think of, plus the negatives *but, not, nor.* The alien mastered all of them easily and used them in new sentences. Then came pronouns, *I* and *you.* The alien pointed a finger at Jamal and said, "You." But he made no move to use a pronoun for himself.

Maybe they should try embedded and recursive structures next, Jamal thought. But before he could start, the door of the interrogation room

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opened and the guard looked in. He spoke quietly to Glenys who nodded. The door shut again. Stepping to the one-way mirror, Glenys touched the glass. The river meadow transformed itself quickly into a stargazer's map of the night sky.

Damn, Jamal thought, *I guess we're taking this "alien" bit for real!* The bizarre situation caught him by the throat every so often. *You're talking to E.T., bro!*

One thing about the strange being opposite him was the almost total lack of what psychologists called "affect." He displayed no emotional reaction to anything that happened around him, not pleasure nor excitement, and not even boredom when the lessons were repetitive, just an unwavering focus. Jamal found this cold intensity unnerving.

But when he saw the map, the tall alien stood up and made a circling motion over the screen with his index finger.

"What do you think he's doing?"

Glenys shook his head. "A circle? No, a spiral. Spiral galaxy? Maybe he's saying the Milky Way is his home galaxy too. But where in the galaxy?"

"With his language skills he ought to be able to tell us straight out."

One of the agents bent his head to his collar and murmured into his comm unit.

The alien turned away from the map on the screen. Whatever he'd intended to communicate, Jamal thought, he was done with it, and if humans were too dense to figure it out, that was their problem. Suddenly angered, he pushed his chair back and stood up.

"I'm done for the day. We're getting nowhere."

"I'll have him supplied with recorded samples of conversational English this evening," Glenys said as they left the room. "He wouldn't be the first person to master a foreign language by watching sitcoms."

"He's playing games with us."

"I suspect his mission is to learn about us, not teach us about him," Glenys said.

After dinner with Tom Wang in the executive dining room — with real china for the prime rib and real crystal for the California Cabernet — he excused himself early, and made his way a little unsteadily back to his

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room. Wang hadn't eaten much, more interested in Jamal's report, what there was of it. Wang's questions had been probing. He'd seemed to accept the news the stranger was probably an alien, not a construct, better than Jamal had expected, and he wondered about that. *Humoring me because of dear old dad and my "military family"*? Wang probably figured Jamal would achieve the objective of decoding the stranger's language even if his judgment was seriously impaired.

Either way, Wang must be disappointed with the lack of progress he'd made today. Extraterrestrial or enemy construct who was rapidly learning English wasn't exactly what the NSA or the government would be hoping for. Location, intention, and capability were more like it, and he estimated his chances of getting those answers in the near future somewhere between highly unlikely and not at all.

He remembered a time in his childhood when the search for extraterrestrial intelligence had been a hot topic, but decades of no results had taken their toll; people had given up expecting E.T. to arrive or even signal his existence — or even the son of E.T., lord what a terrible sequel that was! And if this really was an alien they were dealing with, where was the mother ship? If there was one, NASA's Near Earth Asteroid Tracking facilities at Maui or Palomar would surely have found it. A society that put space hotels and telescopes and solar mirrors into orbit ought to be able to manage that much.

It scared him to think the future of humanity might be balanced on so small a thing as the first words an alien learned from an unprepared teacher. He was embarrassed to think his dissertation had even hinted the process might be easy. And what impression were they making on an obviously superior alien visitor by keeping him locked up, interacting with him in a sterile interrogation room — and who knew what else he personally wasn't aware of? Whatever happened here at Fort Meade, there were going to be repercussions down the line.

When he opened the door to his room, he found it lit by one small lamp on the bedside table. Warm shadows blurred the hotel-style furnishings, lending a cozy air of invitation to the room, and there was a heady scent he hadn't noticed before. The circle of light drew his attention to the bed where the covers had been turned back for him in best hotel fashion. But unlike any hotel he'd experienced, there was a woman in his bed.

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"Hi," she said in a husky voice. "Thought you might like some company."

Wang's intern smiled at him. With one hand she slowly pushed the sheet down so he could see she was naked. Her body was lovely, full and rosy and inviting.

He had an instant reaction to her invitation. *Not so fast!* his brain warned. He'd halfway expected to get her in bed sometime, just not this quick. His brain was overruled by the spreading warmth of his arousal. *Don't question gift horses!*

"Come here and let me undo your shirt buttons." She patted the bed beside her.

"Whoa, Corinne," he said. "This is a bit fast, don't you think?"

"You deserve a little R and R."

"Damn straight!" He dropped down on the bed beside her, aware of the Cabernet buzz that seemed to have unstrung his muscles, and let her fingers tiptoe over his bare chest. "You sure this would play okay with your boss?"

She pouted. "Why does he have to know what we do on our own time?"

That sounded reasonable. And nobody had told him not to fraternize with the staff. In fact, they hadn't told him much of anything. Corinne probably went to bed with any guy with power in the building, but so what? No harm in a little fooling around; he'd certainly earned it today. He could feel the tension of the day draining out of him at her touch. "That's great. You're wonderful."

She laughed. "I bet you say that to all the women."

"Not at all. I like women, but — "

She covered his mouth with hers, cutting off his protest.

That was the last coherent thought he had for a long while.

Afterward, he lay back sweaty and exhausted with Corinne in the curve of his arm. Wang was probably going to be pissed if he found out, he thought, but thinking was still a hazy process and the thought slipped away in his general sense of well-being.

"Whew!" He shook his head. "Wow."

She propped herself up on an elbow and gazed down at him. "And I thought you were a language expert!" she teased. "Stay right there, lover boy. I brought some wine."

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He closed his eyes, content to be told what to do by this gorgeous young woman who apparently found him irresistible. He heard the sound of a cork being drawn and liquid splashing into glass.

A moment later she said, "Hold still."

He felt her mouth close over his, gently forcing his lips to part, then a small stream of wine made its way over his tongue and slid like cool fire down his throat.

"Mmm. Great." One word at a time seemed about all he could dredge up.

"You ready for more?"

"Wine...or sex?" he managed to ask.

He heard her throaty laugh again, and he wrapped both arms around her and pulled her down on his chest, spilling wine all over himself and the bed. He didn't care. She was right; he'd needed this.

"Poor Jamal," she whispered against his skin. "You were so tense. They're expecting too much from you."

"They expect a miracle."

"Do you want to talk about it? I mean, my boss obviously debriefs you on the details, but I'll bet you don't get to release the emotions you must be going through. Men never talk to each other about their emotions."

He tousled her hair playfully. She might be a power junkie, but there was that indefinable air of innocence about her that appealed to him. "Real men don't have emotions."

"You could've fooled me," she said.

The giddiness of the last few minutes faded slowly away and he lay back, his body pleasantly relaxed. "It doesn't make any sense, Corinne. This guy — I have no clue what his name is or anything else about him — he's got to be highly intelligent. I thought I was sharp, but I couldn't learn a language anywhere near as fast as he seems to have done in just two sessions."

"You're getting him to speak English? Well, that's progress, isn't it? My boss thought he might be a mute."

"He can speak all right, but he doesn't connect. No reaction to anything. No emotion."

"A real man?" she teased.

He punched her arm lightly. She rewarded him with another sip of

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wine by personal delivery. The combination of physical exhaustion, sex and alcohol was overwhelming. He felt as if he were floating.

"Seems odd that we're devoting so many resources to a vagrant," she said.

"Whatever he is, the guy's not a vagrant. One look at him tells you he's more than that."

"I don't have the clearance to see him. Wang's keeping him under wraps."

His head cleared suddenly and he was uneasy. If she didn't have clearance to see the alien, maybe he shouldn't be talking about him with her. Nobody had bothered to clue him in about who he could talk to and who not. Damn this cloak and dagger stuff. He hated it. But maybe he should be a little cautious what he said to an over-eager intern.

"Maybe Wang's wrong and the guy's just a nutcase," he said, careful to keep his tone casual.

"Actually, he sounds autistic," she said. "I live with my sister and her youngest is autistic. Scores high on IQ tests, but he shows no emotional connection to the family, even his mother."

He rolled over on top of her. "Yeah, that's probably it. Now. How about — "

"If that's the case, we shouldn't be keeping him locked up. Laws protecting people with disabilities have been on the books a very long time. And why's the boss so secretive about him if he's just a poor autistic person? My sister knows a lot of people around here who'd be upset about that if — "

"People would be upset if they thought he was autistic?"

"You know what I mean." She made another pouty face at him.

"Let me show you what *I* mean," he said, relieved to be back on safer ground.

ALDO GLENYS WAS waiting for him the next morning, seated on a lounge near the elevator. The agent glanced at his watch as Jamal appeared.

"So it's almost noon. I'm late," Jamal said. "Why didn't you knock on my door?"

"You had company last night. I thought you might need some extra sleep."

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Corinne had left before dawn, early enough no one would be around to see her, or so he'd thought. "Can't keep anything from the NSA, apparently."

"It's your business. Shall we get on with the government's?"

He noted a cooler tone in the man's voice and wondered again what exactly was Glenys's role here. Obviously he had to be more than Jamal's babysitter. He'd started to slip into thinking of the situation as "Us:" himself, the alien, and Glenys, and "Them:" the two agents and whoever was behind the mirror. Remembering his earlier suspicion about Glenys, he decided that might be a misjudgment.

"Right. It's my business," he said. "And while we're at it, I'd like to request a change of scene. I'm tired of staring at my reflection in a one-way mirror, knowing some NSA wonk is probably staring right back."

"What did you have in mind?"

Glenys's face betrayed no reaction to the request. Almost as frustrating as talking to the alien, he thought.

"A trip to the mall. A visit to the zoo." He was amused to see a flicker of disapproval in Glenys's eyes.

"I doubt Wang will agree to a public appearance," Glenys said dryly, touching the comm unit he wore. He spoke briefly for a couple of seconds, then touched the device to turn it off; he palmed the sensor pad to summon the elevator.

Neither spoke as the elevator moved. When the doors opened again on the floor where the interrogation room was located, Jamal saw the two agents waiting outside.

Glenys's comm pinged. Jamal walked on ahead, conscious of the murmured one-sided conversation behind him.

"Yes sir — Of course — No, not at all — Yes sir."

"You tell Wang I'm not working on this any further if I don't have full control," Jamal said over his shoulder. Fighting words the Tuskegee airman would've approved, no doubt.

The guard nodded to Jamal and opened the door. He went into the room.

"Wang wasn't happy about it," Glenys said as he came in, followed by the agents. "But he gave permission for a brief outing on the grounds. We're to make sure our friend doesn't take his clothes off."

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Jamal howled with laughter, startling the alien who was sitting at the table this morning.

"Wang doesn't want him attracting attention," Glenys said lamely. "And we're to have an armed escort."

He stopped laughing. "What for? An alien that can suddenly appear in front of state troopers can just as quickly disappear in front of an armed escort."

"Maybe it's for *our* protection."

"If he was going to harm us, he's had a lot of opportunity to do it already!"

The alien was staring at them — taking it all in, understanding every word no doubt. Jamal felt disconnected this morning, further away from understanding than the day he'd started. If what he'd just said to Glenys was right, why was the alien still here? Presumably he could leave any time he wanted. His presence meant he still wanted something. *His mission is to learn about us,* Glenys had said. But what was he learning? And he himself was no further along. Without a single example of the alien's language, he couldn't begin to test his hypothesis. If this was the way things were going to be in the future, a series of confusing, frustrating encounters with aliens, he didn't want any part of it.

"Let's go," he said abruptly. It came out *lezgo,* and he was perversely glad to see by the alien's brief hesitation that he didn't immediately grasp the ellipsis. *Humans one, Extraterrestrials zero,* he thought sourly. "And you can tell Tweedledum and Tweedledee they're not wanted on the expedition."

Glenys started to argue, then stopped and made a small motion with his hand to the agents. They stayed behind as Jamal escorted the alien out of the room.

He saw right away he'd only won a partial victory. Two young soldiers in paisley camouflage fatigues with automatics bulking black against their hips fell in with them as they walked to the elevator. The alien towered over all of them. Five crowded into the cab's small space was claustrophobic. Nobody spoke. He was aware of his arm pressed against the alien's arm. There was no electric tingle, no sensation of power conveyed one way or the other in the contact today. Reassuring, but also disappointing.

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Outside, clouds raced across the sky, pushed by a cool wind laced with the smell of wet earth promising a storm before evening. One on either side of the alien, Jamal and Glenys walked ahead of the soldiers who dropped a few paces behind. They headed for a small stand of immature fir trees. A hundred yards away, a group of men in dark suits and women carrying briefcases and bright umbrellas hurried toward a bland stone building, its roof bristling with antennae and sprouting dishes like ears tuned to the world's secrets. One woman in a pink raincoat reminded him of Wang's intern. Overhead, a dark, unmarked chopper tilted quietly in, heading for an unseen landing site, its rotors churning the damp air, chilling the back of his neck. He pulled up the collar of his parka.

New scenery meant an opportunity for new vocabulary, and he supplied it. Tree, cone, grass, stone, rain, dirt, sky, cloud, bird, wind, car — all either pointed at or pantomimed. But no amount of effort brought even one alien word in return.

"The rain that falls is cold," the alien said suddenly. "But all things that live on Earth need water."

They both stared at him. Jamal became aware his mouth was open and shut it hurriedly. "Where did he learn embedded structure?"

"The videos I gave him to watch last night, probably."

Jamal shook his head. "Do you ever think this might not be such a good idea?"

"All the time," Glenys said.

Ahead of them lay a small ornamental pond, dappled with the light rain; it appeared to be a recent addition along with the spindly trees, a green breathing space, an afterthought in the middle of all the concrete. The pond was occupied by two ducks and an opportunistic seagull. A stone bench had been placed under firs that needed another couple of years' growth before they'd provide shade; beside it, a trash receptacle. It was a place where staff could eat lunch, forgetting for the moment they were in the middle of the fortress of Fort Meade, its high wire fence just a few yards away. A very human kind of place, he thought, kind of like Planet Earth itself, small, insignificant, surrounded by a vast and hostile space.

He sat with Glenys, watching the alien who had moved to the water's edge and was apparently observing the birds. What was he learning about

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this planet he'd landed on, Jamal wondered, and what would he do with the information? One thing was certain, he didn't see any need to confide his impressions to his hosts.

The soldiers loitered a few paces away; he heard one murmuring into his comm unit. Thunder rolled briefly in the distance; there was an electric urgency in the air. Going to be a wet afternoon, he thought.

"Why can't I get through to him, Glenys? He's obviously intelligent enough to understand what we want."

"Dangerous to make assumptions. It's a disadvantage that he looks human."

The alien was squatting now. The ducks approached him hopefully through the gray mist of rain, trailing long vees in the water. The gull took flight, circling his head, squawking harshly.

"Hard to believe this is really happening, isn't it? Here we are with a real freaking alien, and people going about their business outside that fence with absolutely no idea."

"Just as well. Not a lot of sympathy for us from civilians at any time. We have a full-time protest group outside the main gate."

"What're they protesting?"

"Anything and everything. Our existence, I guess."

Jamal felt unsettled, as if he were about to come down with the flu. "You know what really bothers me? Where are the others? He can't have come any great distance through space all by himself."

"We're working on that."

"'We?'"

"NASA, mostly. Other agencies I'm not at liberty to name."

He glanced at the two soldiers who were carefully not looking at them. "We keep coming back to the same question: Why is he here at all?"

"To learn our language? It may be the only thing we have that's worth taking right now."

"If that's the case, he had the opportunity to learn several before I got to him."

"His race is obviously far ahead of ours technically. They're not afraid to drop a live being in Maryland for the initial contact instead of an automated probe."

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"Damn lucky choice! Showing up naked in public some places around the world would've got him killed immediately."

"At least we ask questions first," Glenys said.

Jamal took his frustration out by lobbing small green pine cones into the trash can. The rain came down harder. "Time to go inside."

When he looked back at the pond, the alien wasn't there.

"What the hell? Glenys — Where'd he go? Where is he?"

Glenys spoke rapidly into his comm unit, then pointed. "He's heading for the main gate."

The alien was loping steadily in a straight line across the parking lot toward the high, armored fence surrounding the NSA compound. Jamal was astounded at how far he'd gone already. He'd only taken his eye off the alien for a moment.

"The guards will stop him at the gate," Glenys said. "They have orders not to let anyone in or out without authorization."

"That's what I'm afraid of. He'll walk right into their weapons!"

Alarmed by Jamal's outburst, the two escort soldiers had unholstered their guns.

"Just catch him," he shouted at them. "Don't shoot him!" He broke into a run, yelling: "Wait!"

Not a word he'd introduced yet. Damn. He was afraid that any minute the alien would get shot or repeat his stunning appearance in reverse. Wang was going to nail his hide to the wall if he let either happen. Panting, adrenaline flooding his muscles, he pounded across the tarmac. He could see the main gate in the fence and a dark-colored limousine making its way through into the compound. The guards apparently hadn't noticed the alien running toward them yet; their attention seemed drawn to something happening outside the gate. Now he could see a small crowd of people gathering out there, some of them unfolding a banner.

The alien had almost reached the gate before the guards noticed him. Jamal saw their weapons swing up into position.

"Don't do it!" he yelled. "Friend!" He was breathing heavily, slowing in spite of his urgent need to keep going. There was a bitter, metallic taste in his mouth.

Glenys streaked past him, one arm high displaying his ID, shouting something Jamal couldn't make out.

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The black chopper reappeared overhead and circled the gate. He caught the glint of a gun muzzle through the open hatch. *No!* he thought. *They don't understand!*

The small crowd surged toward the guards, shouting, the banner dipping up and down. Now he was close enough to read its hand-lettered message: RIGHTS FOR THE DISABLED. The barrier had not had time to come all the way down after the limousine went through. And the alien stopped suddenly just inside the gate, holding his arms out wide as if to embrace the little crowd.

One of the gate guards went down under the protestors who clambered over him to get inside. With his last burst of energy, Jamal leaped forward in a futile attempt to reach the alien. He collided with a burly man who knocked him down and fell on top of him. His head smacked against the concrete, and for a moment his vision blurred and he went deaf. His arm flared with pain.

Then sound returned and he became aware of a female voice saying over and over. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for you to get hurt!"

He looked up into the panic-stricken face of Wang's intern kneeling beside him. Her short red hair curled damply over the collar of her pink raincoat.

"I told my sister this morning — we share everything with each other," Corinne said, tears streaming down her face. "But I didn't mean for this to happen. I don't want to lose my job."

He tried to pat her shoulder reassuringly but his muscles wouldn't obey him. He felt woozy, his eyes not focusing properly as he stared past her at Aldo Glenys.

Glenys had his gun drawn.

He saw a flash and heard the crack that split the air.

THE ROOM WAS dark, cold, smelling of rubber and antiseptic. Jamal heard something humming quietly to itself in the silence.

One arm was in a cast from shoulder to wrist, and his ribs were taped up. He became aware of an intravenous shunt on the back of his free hand.

"You were very lucky," Aldo Glenys's voice said in the darkness. "You have a concussion, but you could've been killed."

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"The alien?"

"Gone."

He made an attempt to sit up and groaned as pain flared in his ribs. "You killed him?"

"By the time we got it sorted out, he wasn't to be found."

"Disappeared? Like he suddenly appeared? Dammit, Glenys! Give it to me straight."

"Lie still. You have a couple of cracked ribs as well as a broken arm. The official word is there was no one here to disappear. A false rumor set the disabled rights activists off. A misunderstanding, no basis to it!"

"We killed him and his friends took the body."

Glenys gazed at him for a moment. "I'm not confirming any part of that. But you have a more immediate problem. Wang's not about to forgive you for letting this opportunity get away. He went out on a limb with the Agency by bringing you in. The Secretary of Defense advised more traditional methods of interrogation."

He thought of Corinne in the pink raincoat, a rain of tears on her cheeks. "What happened to Wang's intern?"

"I believe the young lady has resigned."

"It wasn't her fault. That demonstration —"

"The demonstration had nothing to do with it. We get them all the time."

"So then?"

Glenys shrugged.

"What's your role in this, Glenys?"

"I didn't shoot him, if that's what you're thinking."

But you would've, given the chance. Jamal lay back, feeling defeated. He hadn't asked for any of this, but being in, he'd wanted a better, less ambiguous outcome. "I did the best any linguist could."

"Not good enough. We're going to have to do better."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Time for a new specialty," Glenys said. "We're going to need *Xeno*linguists next time."

"You really believe there'll be a next time?"

"Don't you?"

"Not if we keep shooting the messenger."

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It had seemed so easy before he met his first alien. He'd been showing off when he speculated about universal language as part of his dissertation, never expecting to have the opportunity to test his hypothesis. And he *still* hadn't tested human ability to crack an alien language. Maybe communication wasn't possible.

Light streamed through the door as a nurse entered with a tray, and he shut his eyes against the painful brightness. She turned on the room lights, making it worse.

"Glad you're awake, Mr. Lenana," she said. "Got to take your meds now."

"Morphine would be good."

She ignored this and handed him two pills and a small paper cup of water, waited to see him take them, then left.

"Wang can't prevent me from writing up a paper on the problem," he said when the door closed behind the nurse.

"Nothing happened here. No journal will take it. You'll be just another blog nutcase."

"This was still a free society last time I checked, bro."

Glenys stood up and retrieved a raincoat from the back of his chair. "I think you'll find you've come to a dead end."

"I don't accept that!"

"Don't sweat it. Better that you put your skills into the needs of the future."

He could neither trust Glenys nor bring himself to distrust him. He suspected there was a lot more depth to the man than his agency training alone would suggest.

"Aldo — " he began.

"I've decided to retire from the Agency. Going home to Switzerland."

"Giving up," he said harshly. "Well, I don't give up! When I get out of here, first thing I'm going to do is finish climbing Kilimanjaro. Can't let not finishing things become a habit. Then I'll test your hypothesis about publishing a paper."

"Do that," Glenys said. "And when you're ready to admit it's useless, come and see me. I've put my card on your table. Forget what happened here, Jamal. We'll talk about how to prepare to handle the next visitors — whenever they show up. We may not get off so easily next time."

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After Glenys had gone, he lay staring at the ceiling, thinking it over. Even if he personally never saw another alien in his life, he knew humanity's long isolation was over. Someone had to be prepared to deal with the aliens who would surely come.

And who better than himself to figure out how to prepare — What was Aldo's term? — *Xenolinguists.* Awkward word. But given the way languages evolved, it would probably be simplified before too long.

Even there, he thought as the painkillers started to take hold, the future began with one word.

— *For Denaire*

COMING ATTRACTIONS

This issue marked the start of our current editor's eleventh year at the helm and our thanks go out to the bloggers who have been saying such nice things about the magazine this year. While it might be excessive to "proclaim a new Golden Age," we do think that if you've enjoyed the magazine thus far this year, you'll like what's ahead.

Next month we'll go to the Pennsylvania town of Black William, where an independent record producer contends with the new act he has signed up and with the strange...just what *are* they?...things sighted near the town library. "Stars Seen Through Stone" by Lucius Shepard is a contemporary novella that we think you're going to love.

The rest of the issue hasn't been finalized yet, so you'll have to wait to see whether the new stories by Lawrence C. Connolly, P. E. Cunningham, and Ray Vukcevich run next month or not.

We can, however, promise that we'll soon have a new novella by Albert Cowdrey for you, and "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" by Ted Chiang is due to run in the September issue. We also have stories by John Kessel, Robert Silverberg, and Michael Swanwick in the offing. If you've been meaning to subscribe, do so now so you won't miss any of the goodies we have in store for you.

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In our January issue this year, Marta Randall made her return to our pages with a tale of magic realism. Now she takes us into space — specifically, one little nook of it known as the Curve....

Lázaro y Antonio

By Marta Randall

It starts

SURE LÁZARO WAS BROKE, but he still wasn't interested in rolling drunks, not even rich belligerent Academy *chilito* drunks. This one had shown up last night with some *pendejo* brotherhood, too many to take on, but tonight he was alone and still a dick so Lázaro had no qualms about holding Antonio's new foxleather jacket while Antonio whacked the guy's fright-coifed blond head, just precisely so. The kid fell into the alley, all bonelessness and fat, and Antonio had his wallet out and popped his com and wasted the chip, all within thirty seconds. Lázaro observed with admiration: it was always a pleasure to watch a master at work. A couple of minutes after the kid had stepped into the alley to take a leak, Antonio and Lázaro strolled out together, Antonio wriggling his shoulders a little to seat the jacket and smoothing back his black hair. Lázaro admired that, too.

The Curve was quiet for a Friday night. Paychecks had come out last

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week and would come again next week, but those who had money tonight were not the kind to waste it on the bars and bitches in the Port's seedy arc. The solid citizens were all at home Northside, with their families and their big screens and their hot dinners. The *chilito* wasn't an exception, he was a tourist, which was why Antonio felt free to relieve him of his cash and com. Tourists were warned to stay away from the Curve, warned that the spaceport cops wouldn't protect them once they left the port by the Southside gate. There was always someone who couldn't resist the challenge. The ones who could take care of themselves had a good time and no harm done, but dicks like this one were easy pickings.

"So, how much he had?" Lázaro asked.

Antonio shrugged. "Dunno, bro. We get to Celia's, I'll tell you. Not gonna paw it out here. What, you some kinda tard?"

"Hell no," Lázaro said, but his outrage was faked. He was some kinda tard and he usually admitted it. It made life easier.

Celia's was almost empty. Two old birds sat at the bar, staring into their glasses and not saying much. Krumholz, who owned Celia's, was in a generous mood and had cranked up the sound so everyone could enjoy his beloved ancient techno. Lázaro didn't like it because he couldn't follow the melodies, but Krumholz was always good for a drink and a place to hang out for a few hours without being hassled. Now Lázaro followed Antonio to a booth near the back. Krumholz came over and slapped at the table with his rag.

"You guys freeloadin' again?" he demanded.

"No, man, we got scratch," Antonio said with lazy confidence. "I wanna beer, and another for my 'ssociate."

Krumholz snorted but went back to the bar. Antonio waited until he came back with the drinks, collected a five, and left. Each took a ritual sip of beer before Antonio slid the wallet onto the table. The two men regarded it with approval. It was a nice one, made of some fine-grained leather, probably real, tanned a pleasant light brown with fancy designs burned into it along the edges and a complicated glyph on the front. Most tourists just used paper folds from the change houses: no thumbs allowed on the Curve. This guy either traveled a lot or wanted people to think he did. Lázaro tapped the wallet and, when Antonio didn't object, touched it again.

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"Whazzat?" he said.

"It's the, what you call it, the picto for some fancy-ass school off near the Hub." Antonio used one fingernail to flip the wallet open. Sheaves of plastic decorated the insides under the lip of the billfold. Here's the thing about plastic and chips: a chip's this bitty thing and kinda private, but plastic, hell, you can flash that around and impress everyone you can get to look at you. Antonio snorted. Lázaro knew that Antonio had plenty of plastic himself and wasn't dazzled by this lot.

When Antonio opened the billfold, he cursed with surprise and jerked his hand back.

"Yeah? What?" Lázaro whispered, leaning away from the table.

Antonio lifted the lip of the billfold again and started sliding out the bills. There were a lot of them, more than either man had ever seen in one place. Lázaro whistled under his breath.

"*Hijo de la madre*, man," he breathed. "You think they're real?"

Antonio dropped a napkin over them. "How'n hell do I know?" he muttered, and stuck his fingers in the billfold again. This time he brought out scraps of paper. Sales receipts, tickets, notes in a language neither man recognized. The last one held a series of numbers. Lázaro squinted at the paper and muttered the numbers. "One one two three five eight one three two one three four five five eight nine." He looked up. "Mean anythin' to you?"

Antonio shook his head.

Lázaro thought for a long moment. The numbers were almost familiar, like voices so far away that you can't understand them. He shook his own head. "You gonna gimme some of the cash, man? I mean, I held your coat and all."

"Sure, what you take me for?" Antonio's fingers got busy under the napkin. He brought his hand out, palm down, and slid it over to Lázaro. The money moved from Antonio's palm to Lázaro's with the ease of long practice. Lázaro peeked at the bills and grinned and put them in his pocket, the inside one right over his hip.

A few minutes later they finished their drinks. Antonio palmed the bills and plastic into his jacket pocket and left the paper scraps on the table. When his back was turned, Lázaro scooped them up and tucked them away. He didn't know why.

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At the corner, before they parted, Antonio dropped the wallet into a trash mouth. The mouth gargled for a second, flashed, and the wallet was gone. Then they hit each other's shoulders in farewell and went their separate ways.

One one two three five eight

Lázaro sat at the table in his squat and counted over the bills again. There were enough to last for a couple of months, if he was careful, didn't binge, made his food instead of buying it — hell, he could even pay his rent ahead and still have some cash left over for a new jacket, maybe foxleather like Antonio's. It was getting cold out there.

Or he could blow the whole thing in a week, roistering along the Curve like any other fool with a pocket full of cash and enough whiskey and drugs in him to make sure that he didn't have a care in the world, or didn't recognize them. He grinned, thinking about that and about the cathouse above Papa Carlisle's. It didn't matter that he'd spend a week in lockup, jonesing until the last of the drugs washed out of him and left him back in the pale beige world with nothing in his pockets and not even the memories of the drunk to sustain him. A good drunk was its own reward.

He had piled the paper scraps beside the money and now he went through them again. The lettering looked like it ought to be familiar but it just barely wasn't, like something seen through wavy glass. The only numbers were on the scrap that he had read. They were hand-written and strung together to form one long chain. The next numbers in the sequence were 144233 but Lázaro didn't know why he knew that. It felt like how it felt when old garbage came up from the back of his brain, stuff he'd rather not have, from a life that he couldn't remember. He pushed the paper around with his forefinger. Too many numbers to be a passkey. Maybe some form of ID or an account number. He could pay for time on public access and search, but he wouldn't get anything useful although he didn't know why he knew that.

He pondered this as he broke off some soup and nuked it. This being the first day of his current riches, he had determined to stretch it out as long as he could before he fell, as he knew he inevitably would, into the

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delirium of the Curve. It bothered him that the number sequence wasn't just gibberish, it bothered him that he couldn't let it go. He pushed the numbers out of his head and thought about the plastic Antonio had palmed but wouldn't use. Plastic was trash but it caused trouble. Antonio knew what to do with it; by now the plastic was probably out-system somewhere, making mischief in places that Antonio and Lázaro and even the drunk kid had never been.

The soup was pretty good. He dunked the heel of a bread loaf into it and counted out the bills again. One one two three five eight one three...maybe the numbers didn't mean anything alone but pointed to something else. Like, maybe, the next numbers in the sequence. Or pointed to a pattern. Images grew into his consciousness, patterns starting and growing and turning on themselves to the rhythm of almost but not quite 1.618 from the zero square where you started to the one square to the two square to the three square to the five square to the eight square and on and on through the matrices of the Continuum, each square turning into itself to the next square in a dance folding and doubling until you reach, you reach, you reach....

Damn, Lázaro thought. He grabbed up the paper scraps and shoved them into his ancient trash mouth. Nothing happened. He hit it on the side and finally it grunted and flashed, and the papers whooshed into gray ash and disappeared. Lázaro returned to the table, grabbed another hunk of stale bread, and slammed it into the soup. Drops of broth scattered over the table, balling up in the accumulated dust.

Screw all of it. He'd spend the money on the biggest, loudest, longest drunk anybody in the Curve had ever had. Yeah. As soon as he cooped out a bit so he'd be fresh and ready for action. He could start at Papa Carlisle's and work his way up one side of the Curve and down the other, and end up at Papa's again but upstairs this time. Or he could start upstairs at Papa's and snag him a honey and have some company up and down the Curve. Yeah. Yeah, that.

He pushed the soup bowl aside, where it settled against a growing collection of crusted plates and crawling green food wrappers, and rolled onto his shelf. Tomorrow. Early. Up one side and down the other. That would make all this damned clarity go away.

* * *

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Domes, bubbles, and arcs

First, the Port dome's not really a dome, it's an annulus but everybody calls it a "dome" so what the hell. The top's open and the sides only come up about a thousand meters because the designers figured that was enough but of course it wasn't. So the ships go in and the ships come out, and the gas and garbage spills into the Port and down the outsides, too, like this thick crap soup. The Port dome's about half a klick thick and inside are offices and subways and hotels and all the stuff you need to run a good respectable Port, but it isn't enough space. It never is. You'd think they could've figured that out but they never do.

So after the Port dome went up they built this lean-to partial dome that tilts up against the Port dome like a crescent cupping a bigger arc: the Curve. It was supposed to be just warehouses and megas, not living space, so they didn't attach it to the Port dome very well and now the Curve pulls away from the Port dome a little more every year, and a little more gas and garbage falls into the Curve but nobody seems to give a damn.

Northside, there's the Bubbles with the residentials and parks and stores and crap like that. Inside the Port dome there's a whole separate dome called the Island that was management and politics before the plague came. You can forget about all that. This story isn't about the Bubbles or the Island or the plague, it's just about Lázaro and Antonio and the Curve. Oh yeah, and it's about Jane, too, a little bit.

Jane

The next morning he wasn't drunk or hung over which was kind of too bad because it meant he could see okay. Papa Carlisle's crowded up against an edge of the Curve, next to where the port dome came down into the dirt and under where the arc of the Curve dome lay up against the bigger dome but not quite, so weather crept in. Today there was bright, sunny weather falling through the dome joins, and that was too bad too because Papa Carlisle's didn't do well in sunny weather. It shabbied up all the scales and feathers.

Lázaro came through the front shimmer. Papa was up already, wearing a face ferocious in its cheerfulness until he saw Lázaro and the

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cheerfulness fell away, as did the extravagant mustache. Papa turned back to its card game and turned her sweet, sexy face into the usual mirror.

"Hey," Lázaro said, his feelings hurt. "I got scratch."

Papa turned back to him. The flat mirror face grew one eyebrow, which rose into an arch. "Yes?" Papa said. "Where did you find money, you useless junk-diver? Were you relieving inebriated personages of their superfluity of cash?" Papa hadn't grown a mouth, so the words came out of the air behind it.

Lázaro squirmed. "Not me," he said, clinging to the half-truth. "Look, I got scratch and I wanna spend it, maybe with...with...who you got today you can rent to me? Not too shaggy," he added with haste. "I don't want be seen with no skant."

Papa waved this away. "Today I am honored by the presence of Mistress Anastasia of the Fourteen Mysteries, the lovely and talented Stephen Comelightly, and — " Papa paused. "And — we can call her Jane."

"Jane," Lázaro breathed. "Jane."

The mirror grew lips, which smiled and shouted, "Jane, darling. Descend."

"Wait," Lázaro said, panicked. "I ain't got that much scratch, I mean, I gotta save I ain't paid up my rent and — "

And by then it was too late, because a brand-new Jane was there and smiling at him as though she knew that he did so have that much scratch and that she scared him pale and that it didn't matter because, after all, she was Jane and they had been married for twenty years and he still loved her like fury even though he couldn't quite remember anything else about her. But Jane did that to you, had always done that even way back when he was a — was a — was a what? He almost had it for a minute before it pixelated and was gone, leaving just Jane.

"Children," Papa said, smoothing a mustache that grew somewhere under her tilted eyebrow and beside his still-smiling lips. "Go."

They went.

You dance a box

By noon he found himself telling her all about it. They sat over a plate of spaghetti with meatballs in the back room at Giancarlo's, sharing a fork

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and a beer and a glass of wine which mostly Jane drank, and he told her about Antonio and the rude drunk Academy asshole and the money and

"...three five eight one three two one three four," he whispered.

Jane's pretty eyes went wide. "The Fibonacci sequence," she said, and he nodded because of course that is what it was. "A space grid?"

"I dunno. Maybe. Yeah." Lázaro looked at her. "Jane? Why do I know that?"

"I don't know," she said, touching his hand. "I just met you this morning, remember? But that's what it is, yeah? I mean, launch's zero and you follow the numbers until somehow you're off into the Continuum, zero one one two three five eight thirteen twenty-one...don't need to be a space jock to know that."

"I ain't just no space jock," he muttered. She touched his hand again.

"Of course you're not, Lázaro. Of course not."

That's when Antonio came in, waving his flash and wearing his foxleather jacket over his shoulders, in that suave way he had. Lázaro waved at him. Antonio looked over the bar along the side wall and the tables in front of it, already crowded with tourists and spacers and a couple townies come to the Curve for rough trade along with their lunch. He had that lazy picking-and-choosing look on his face. Lázaro waved harder and for a moment it looked like Antonio was gonna ignore him before he saw Jane and came over like she was reeling him in.

Antonio got all smoothly and snakely and put his ass down on the bench beside Jane so she had to scootch over but she was smiling because that's what Jane was, a whore, and whores give people what people want. Lázaro didn't mind.

While Antonio sweet-talked Jane, some spacers at a table near the bar made big juhla, yelling and slamming mugs on the table where they flashed out so the beer jumped into the air all on its lone. Lázaro liked it when they did that. He watched and finished off another beer himself. By now he was getting fuzzy around the edges and so was the world. One more and he'd be flying, so he ordered it and downed it and when he looked across the table he saw that Jane and Antonio had disappeared somewhere. Anything Jane made while away from Papa's was hers and Lázaro didn't begrudge her a little walking-around money. Besides, by then the flying was happening, the backwards and forwards inside his head matching the

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backwards and forwards inside his mind. All the comforting fuzziness came back like he lived in a world that he couldn't just quite almost touch, but it was okay now because he was backwards and forwards and flying and he didn't care.

So he let himself fly over to the spacers's table and took a chair and slid it up between a couple of them and waved his hand at the barkeep and waved at the table to order another round. The barkeep blinked and buzzed and the spacers looked at each other and moved over for him.

Lázaro took a deep, happy breath. "*Yo soy un* Fibs," he announced.

"The hell," said the spacer with captain's bars, but she said it grinning. "No way you ain't no Fibs, knocker."

"*Te lo juro*," Lázaro said. The waitress floated a tray full of drinks over and everybody grabbed. Lázaro stuck a bunch of bills in the waitress's navel, which went green. He liked doing that. "You start at zero and you dance a box," he said with authority. "Then you dance a box, then you dance a box, then you dance a box until you're solid gone. Whoof! Just like that!"

The captain laughed. "You are so fulla shit," she said. She lifted her drink to him. "*Danke*."

The table had finished drying itself by now, so Lázaro, who was about to illustrate by drawing boxes on the tabletop with beer, instead just ran his index finger in an imaginary square, joined to a square, joined to a square.

"It's the numbers," he told them. "It's the numbers and dancing, numbers to boxes to places to time to something, something I don't remember...but I remember the numbers. Except," he said, compelled by an engineered honesty, "I don't know how to use it anymore but I remember I did use it, but then I stop remembering it at all."

"*Skitte*," one of the spacers said with cheerful contempt, and they all went back to yelling and drinking. The numbers fell out of Lázaro's head and he was happy to sit with them, like he belonged at the table, like he was still a Fibs and the yelling and drinking were home somehow, except they weren't.

"Hey, Fibs, we're dry," one of the spacers shouted to him. Lázaro started to raise his arm but somebody put a hand on his wrist and stopped him. He looked up and back at Antonio and Jane. Antonio always was

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kinda fast and here he was done and his hair combed back and bein' his buddy. That Antonio didn't miss a thing.

Now he shook his head at the spacers. "I think my bro Laz has bought enough," he said. "What you givin' him in return, just you let him sit here? You think that's some kinda big deal? You show some respect."

"Like hell," the captain said but she didn't sound mad. "Your ponyboy says he's a Fibs. Don't take kindly to that, mockin' the trade."

Antonio made a big sigh and put his head to one side, like he was exasperated. "First off he ain't my ponyboy, he's my bro. And second, he was Fibs on *Mi Fregado Suerte*."

"Like hell," the captain said again. "Emiliano Corazón's ship? No way. That was one stand-up balls-on smugglin' bastard. They caught him and scrapped the ship years ago."

"Laz," Antonio said. "Show her your arm." Lázaro started rolling up his right shirt-sleeve and Antonio cuffed him lightly on the side of his head. "The other one, *cabron*. With the writing on it."

Lázaro did and held his arm out so everyone could see the numbers and symbols under his skin. Once all that stuff had moved and had lights and color, but that was a long time ago and now it was just a washed-out kind of blue. The spacers crowded around to stare, then backed off and stared at his face instead.

"Hell," the captain said again, quieter. "What happened to him? He wasn't like that when he was Fibs on the *Suerte* — not if he's the one who navved Castle Peaks."

"There an' back," Antonio said. "Come on, Laz, let's get goin'."

When Lázaro stood he staggered a little with all the beer, so Jane put his arm over her shoulders to help him walk. He waved goodbye to his new friends but the captain caught up with them at the door.

"Man, what happened to him?" she demanded. "I heard the Freddies found the ship, said some lyin' *skitte* about a cargo and jumped the ship when they got aboard. Ditched Corazón out on some asteroid."

"Yeah," Antonio said. By now they were out on the Curve and somehow it had gotten to be late afternoon so it was darker and the place looked a lot better. Giancarlo's was almost in the middle and the Curve curved back on both sides until it disappeared behind the port dome's arc. Lázaro smiled at Jane, who smiled back and put his hand on her boob.

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Antonio said, "Bastards don't mind stealin' when it's them doin' it, and don't believe in capital punishment, but they sure as hell believe in gettin' even." There was a pause while he stared at the captain and she stared back at him, and something came up between them because she nodded and Antonio nodded, and Lázaro was happy that his friends were getting along but the flying was going away and he wanted more.

"*Mira*, Antonio," he said, "*quiero mas cerveza.*"

"Yeah, bro, just a minute." Antonio kept staring at the captain.

"The crew," she said. She didn't sound like she was flyin' either anymore. "What happened to the crew?"

Antonio put Lázaro's free arm over his shoulders so Lázaro was bracketed by two people he cared about. The captain looked at his face and looked away again.

"You know that stuff they make, brings back your memories? I mean, everything you want, all the time? Cleans out all the sticky junk in your brain like blasting sludge off an engine? That stuff?" The captain just looked at him. "Yeah, well, before they got to that they found a way to make the sludge. You'd think they ain't got a use for that, brain-gunk, but they ain't about to let nothin' go they can squeeze some use outta it."

"The crew."

"The crew," Antonio said, agreeing. "Laz's brain, he's got so much sludge in there he can't remember nothin'. Sometimes something comes up but he don't know what it is half the time, an' don't know what to do about it."

Antonio took a deep breath. Lázaro's hand had gone slack so Jane put her hand over his and cupped his fingers around her breast.

"Last year he remembered a week of training, like it was yesterday. That's gone. Right now all he can remember is good times, and he's havin' fun. Year from now, maybe two, he'll forget how to breathe, or his heart'll forget how to beat, and that'll be that. 'Cause the Freddies, they don't believe in no death penalty. So they ain't killin' him, they just shot him up and chipped him and dumped him here."

"And you're his jailer," the captain said.

"He don't need no jailer," Antonio said. "He's chipped. There ain't no way out of here."

With that, Antonio and Jane moved him down the street. Lázaro

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looked over his shoulder at the captain. He had told her something, important maybe, but he couldn't remember what it was. After a moment he stopped trying to remember and waved good-bye. She just stared back.

A halcyon interlude

So anyway, Lázaro got to fly but he didn't get to spend a week doing it and didn't get to spend any more of his scratch either, because Antonio took it away and said he'd give it back in pieces. For a little while this made Lázaro mad, before he forgot that he had the scratch at all and was just happy that Antonio gave him money when he wanted it. Jane went back to Papa's but sometimes Antonio let Lázaro buy her out for a couple hours, and they went up and down the Curve and had spaghetti at Giancarlo's before she and Antonio went away to do some nookie-nookie but they always came back. Papa Carlisle let Jane go out cheap on account of he knew Lázaro couldn't fuck but what she did when she was out with him, that wasn't Papa's business at all, so everyone was happy.

So Lázaro's finishing the spaghetti and finishing his beer, and this woman comes and sits across from him and says "Yo" like she knows him, and they talk garbage for a while before Antonio comes back alone and sees her and sits down.

"I figured you'd be back," he said. "Did some research?"

"Ain't much else to do, workin' short hauls around this *penjamo*." She put her beer down. "Corazón's last run."

Antonio nodded.

"Don't know what he was runnin', but rumor says he stood to make a killing from it."

Antonio nodded again.

"Which wasn't on *Mi Suerte* when he got tagged."

"So probably he dumped it," Antonio said. "And it's still sittin' there, somewhere out there, just waitin' for someone to come bag it. You ain't the first to think it."

"And your friend here, if you ain't lyin' and he was Corazón's Fibs, he knows where it is."

"*Knew* where it is," Antonio said.

Lázaro looked from one to the other. "Knew what, Antonio?"

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"Go on," Antonio said to the captain, ignoring Lázaro.

"They got the cleanin'-up memories stuff. So why not just get some for your buddy and clean up his memory, and we go out after the schatz." She leaned back. "Fifty-fifty, you an' me. I cut my crew into my half, you cut your buddy into yours. Win win."

Antonio shook his head. "You can't do it. MemMax's red-list Hub only, and even if you find it it's hella expensive and you ain't got that much scratch, not for enough to do some good. Little dose, all it'll do is get him unfuzzed for maybe a day. You want my help, you get enough so he's never goin' back to this. Got me?"

The captain looked at him, then away, then back, then pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. "I'll find a way," she said. "Don't you go sellin' him to anyone else, hear?"

Antonio just laughed. "You the only bitch crazy enough to think that'll work," he said. "Don't worry. Me an' Laz, we ain't got nowhere to go."

Floating like a yuck parade

After that there was a long time when nothing much happened. The weather that leaked in beside Papa Carlisle's got hot, then it got damp, then it got cool, then it rained like hell and the street flooded so all the mud and garbage and boosters and prophs and dead cats came floating through like a yuck parade. Days like that, Lázaro stayed home. Lately he'd been spending a lot of time back when he was a kid right out of school, before he hooked up with — with — well, never mind. Being right out of school was like swank, lots of money to send home and money in his pocket and good friends and once they all climbed a mountain together, got the gear and hired a guide and went on up the sucker to the very top where there was hardly any air and it was cold as sin, and he and Jane made love in the snow at the top of the world. It was great, like it all happened yesterday, and Lázaro had a good time telling his furniture all about it, telling the jokes and laughing at them, and sharing around the hike food, and saying what his dad said when he called him up from the top of the world and that made him cry a little but it was a good cry even if he couldn't remember why he did it.

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When Antonio showed up Lázaro thought he was the guide and told him they were running low on food and when was it going to stop raining at the top of the world anyway? Antonio went away and came back with food and made Lázaro eat some hot stuff and go to bed. When he woke up Antonio was gone and so was the top of the world and he didn't remember what it was that he missed, only that he missed something. Maybe it was the rain, because there wasn't any now and the mud was drying up with crap sticking up out of it so he had to walk around it real careful 'cause some of that stuff, it got on your foot it could hurt you. He kept walking anyway, trying to find a place that would take him back to the place that he remembered that he couldn't remember. He walked all the way to where the Curve got skinny and dark and stopped in a pile of garbage against the port dome, then he came back on one of the side streets but nothing made him remember anything. He slept out a couple of times. Maybe more. There was maybe someplace else he was supposed to sleep, but maybe not. It made his eyes hurt to try to think about it.

One morning he thought he found the remembering place so he came through the shimmer into Papa's. Papa scowled with only half her face on and then a woman came down and took his hand and led him away.

"We've been looking for you for days," she said. "Are you all right? Stop, turn around, let me see you, damn, Laz, you scared the shit out of Antonio an' me, we thought you'd gone off and died somewhere, where you been?"

Lázaro wanted to tell her, but he couldn't. The words were there, he just couldn't make them work, couldn't remember how to make his mouth make them. Jane started crying and took him upstairs to her room and called Antonio. Lázaro just sat with his hands folded in his lap and the only thing he could remember was that everything he had to remember was gone. It was all dark and cold and hollow and he didn't like it but when he stood to go the woman grabbed his arm and told him he couldn't leave, and that made him angry so he hit her and she fell away so he went out the door and someone he almost knew came and pushed him back into the room and locked the door.

"You okay?" the man said to the woman. The woman nodded and stood and put her hand alongside her face where she was bleeding a little. Lázaro didn't know who had hit her but if he found out he'd make them real sorry.

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Then a voice with no body started shouting and the man in the room cursed and he and the woman took Lázaro away to another place and a second woman came and they all stood around looking at Lázaro and jabbering but nothing they said made any sense to him. Something about swag and something about skunking a deal and other stuff. The woman had a box with shiny things in it and the man talked about what was real and the woman said it was real and did he want it or not and he said he didn't trust her and the other woman, the pretty woman with the black eye, she kept crying and Lázaro kept trying to talk but the words were gone, solid gone, and the harder he tried the more gone they were. First he wept, then he got mad again and stood up and made fists, and the man pulled Lázaro's sleeve up and slapped a skinsting against his arm and then he went to sleep.

He woke up two days later. His brain hurt. Before he could be all the way awake, they fed him and skinned him and he passed out again.

How she got it

It's only available in the Hub and even there you need a full croesus and permission from the Govs carved in platinum and set with gems just to get within a klick of it. Made from some kind of venom from some kind of bug that can only live on a planet that got crudded to death years ago, so you can see that it's pretty rare. But that's not what the story's about, how she found it and got it and brought it back, and we're not stopping the story to say. She found it. She got it. She brought it back. That's enough.

Clarity

The fourth time he woke up, he opened his eyes and saw Antonio sitting there, holding a bowl of hot soup. Behind him a woman in spacer's clothes sat with her butt on the edge of a table, arms crossed, staring at him.

"Toño," Lázaro said. "*Híjole, me duele la cabeza como un verdadero diablo.*"

"Yeah, well, that ain't too surprising," Antonio said but he was grinning like a maniac. "Have some soup."

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"Corazón," the woman said, like she'd said it a lot before. She had captain's bars on her sleeves. Lázaro decided he didn't like her.

"*Mi Fregado Suerte*," she continued.

Lázaro scooted himself up to sit against the wall and took the bowl. "I been drunk?"

"Kinda," Antonio said. He passed a hunk of bread.

"Corazón's last run."

Lázaro frowned at her. "Corazón's last run, some *chingadero* ratted him to the Freddies and they dumped him on some *cagado* asteroid somewhere and trashed the rest of us too."

"But he had a cargo, he dumped it before the Freddies caught him," she insisted. "Where'd he dump it?"

Lázaro took a bite of the bread. It was fresh and tasted great. "Toño?" he said, his mouth full. "What's goin' on?"

Antonio shrugged, leaning back in the chair. It creaked and wobbled, but it held him.

"She got an offer for us," Antonio said. "She's got MemMax, enough to fix what the Freddies did to you. What she wants is the zero point to get to where Corazón dropped his loot, and she'll share it out fifty-fifty, you an' me on one side, her and her crew on the other."

"You don't even have to come with," she said. "Maybe better if you didn't. You just tell me where and — "

"And you take off with the whole thing," Antonio said, like he'd said it a lot already. "What, you think we're stupid or something? Laz can't go 'cause the Freddies got him chipped and he can't leave the Curve but I'm goin' with. You got a problem with that, you say it and we can stop the whole thing right here."

"*Skitte*," she said. "Your ponyboy ain't got enough MemMax in him to be permanent, just enough to buy him maybe a couple weeks then bang, right back to Stupidville. You ain't about to stop it right here."

"And I ain't about to give you the numbers and watch you fly off and hope someday you'll be back, neither," Antonio retorted. "And he ain't my ponyboy, he's my brother, got it?"

They kept bickering. Antonio's foxleather jacket hung from the back of the rickety chair, frayed along the seams so that Lázaro could see the plastic of it. Antonio's slick black hair showed some gray at the roots. He

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had always cared a lot about his looks, even back when they were kids. Lázaro sat up and swung his legs over the side of the shelf. Now that the soup was gone, the room smelled stale and close and there was nothing in it that said it was his place, no glyphs or books or anything, but he knew it was his anyway. He recognized the stains on the wall.

He recognized his memories, too. Being a kid, school, the Academy, climbing mountains, the first commission, the years with Emiliano Corazón, the last run, the bust, and what the Freddies did to him afterward. He remembered the years roaming the Curve while more and more of himself sloughed away, and he remembered Jane, the Jane that had been and the Jane that was.

"How'm I chipped?" he said, interrupting their conversation. Both heads swung toward him. "How'm I chipped?" he repeated. "Where'd they put it?"

"It's, like, it's a blastoma nano." Antonio hesitated. "It's in your brain, Laz. They shoot it into your artery, right about here, and it heads up to your brain and latches on." He took his fingers off his neck. "They know it's there, they check for it, 'slong as they get a signal back they know where you are and that you ain't dead, and it sleeps. But you try to leave, we even try to find it, it goes malignant."

He pulled his mouth down and shrugged and went back to the argument while Lázaro thought about that and about his memories. The argument kept intruding, making noise inside his head as well as outside. Finally he put his hand out to stop them.

"Enough," he said. "Here's how we'll do it. I'll give Toño the zero points, there and back, and your Fibs can run the numbers. I'll stay here with the rest of the MemMax, you two go get the cargo. Is Trafalgar still outside Freddie control?"

"Oh yeah," the captain said. "Outside and wide open."

"You go there, look for a company name of Chisler Chang-Himmel. They commissioned the smuggle, they'll still pay for it. Chang's got a long memory. You divide up the loot, Antonio brings our half back here, you go wherever you want with your own cut. Agreed?"

"Hold on," the captain said. "Why unload it on Chang-Himmel? If it's that damned valuable, we could bid it up...."

"It's kids," Lázaro said. "Chang's kids, embryos. Stem cells, some of

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them, others already growin' parts. Everything in ten-year stasis. Chang commissioned them, then welshed on the debt. Hemetica wouldn't release them and blackballed Chang from the other clone houses, too. Chang's pretty desperate for spare parts. I been out for what, four years?"

"Five," Antonio said.

"Five. Chang still wants them and nobody else does 'cause they're tailored. You want to unload them, you got only one market but that market'll pay big. You take the stuff to Trafalgar. Chang'll want a recognition code — Toño's gonna carry that. And part of the price is Chang gives Toño a ride back. You get the money, you split the money, you split. Nobody gets a chance to screw nobody."

"Stem cells," the woman said. "About how big a payload?"

Lázaro showed her with his hands; maybe the size of a spacer's duffle, maybe a bit smaller. "That's why it's tricky," he said. "It's a small box and it's just floating out there on some bitty asteroid, probably no bigger than the one they left Emiliano on." He rocked back; the shelf creaked and sagged a little. "So, you gonna do it?"

Antonio and the woman looked at each other, then she shrugged and he stuck his hand out and they shook on it. She went outside while the men huddled over the table and Lázaro made Antonio memorize the zero-point coordinates and the recognition code. When Lázaro was satisfied, he put out his hand to keep Antonio from rising.

"Hey, that stuff about the chip. True?"

"Yeah, bro. All of it." Lázaro looked at him and Antonio said, "But listen, man, it's not a bad life. And when this comes down we'll have so much scratch we won't never have to even think about it again, we can walk on money and drink credits and piss gold, we'll be kings of the Curve. You remember all that scratch you used to send home, kept us all goin'? It'll look like mouse dicky next to what we're gonna have. We ain't gonna be livin' in no squats, either. Hell, you could buy Papa Carlisle's if you want, kick that skanky noface bastard outta there and have it all for yourself." He hit Lázaro's shoulder. "What you say, bro? Pretty sweet, yeah?"

"And the stuff, the MemMax — "

"Relax, there's plenty. You got about half in you right now. You get Jane to come in an' babysit you while you finish it off. Another week,

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maybe ten days, and bammo! The gunk's outta your brain and the Freddies won't know nothing."

"And if I stop now — "

"But that won't happen, cause the bitch's gonna give us the rest of the drug just as soon as we let her in again. You take it while we're gone, and when I come back, I tell you bro, kings of the Curve." He hit Lázaro's shoulder again and opened the door for the woman.

And that's almost the way it went down

Antonio and the numbers and the codes and the captain lifted off for the Continuum as soon as she could gather her crew and sober them up. Lázaro stood at the edge of the Curve dome and stared up through the gap until a ship rose into the sunlight, then walked back to his apartment, avoiding Papa Carlisle's. He didn't want to see it. He didn't want to see any more of the Curve than he had to.

Back in his squat, Lázaro sat with his hands in his lap and remembered, although some of the older memories were getting fuzzy and others were already gone. But the Curve memories were clear and strong: laughing with Antonio at Celia's, Papa Carlisle's mirror face, the taste of beer and the way it made him feel like he was flying, and Jane who wasn't Jane but who was, somehow. He remembered how the Curve curved inside its arc of dome and how small it all was, and how the only sky was the little bit of it that leaked in beside Papa Carlisle's. When Antonio came back with all that scratch they'd still be in the Curve and none of the memories would matter because what the hell use was it if you remembered mountains if you couldn't touch them?

There was another memory waiting, an older one. He turned away from it and the very act of turning brought it over him like a falling of light.

How it works

I don't know exactly, I'm no Fibs and neither are you. But it starts where you are, that's the zero and grows square to square, from (zero) where you are to (one) to (zero+one) to (one+one) to (two+one) to (three+two) to (five+three) to (eight+five) and on out forever, in growing strides to the

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reaches of the universe, and every right-angle step is a dimension from zero (here) where you start to (here+up+down) to (here+up+down+backwards+forwards) to (here+up+down+backwards+forwards+time), dancing through the dimensions and the Fibs dances each step, hands and mind and body moving to the rhythm of phi and the Fibs makes a turn and the boxes follow and the dimensions follow into the other there that is the Continuum, like launching the ship out through the pit of your guts, like sex only better because you're it and you're you and you're the ship and the boxes and the dance and the Continuum and when you're not the dance you're waiting for the dance like you wait for a breath or a heartbeat or anything else that keeps you alive because you're a Fibonacci Dancer. You're a Fibs.

The King of the Curve

He couldn't dance, not without a ship, not without the Continuum, not sitting at the table in his squat, not anywhere in the Curve, just not.

He wondered how long the blastoma nano would take to work. He wondered if it would hurt. He wondered if it would eat memories too. He wondered what it would be like, living in the Curve knowing the dance was out there but unable to reach it, ever. He wondered what it would be like to die in the Curve knowing you were dying in the Curve.

He couldn't change the Curve and he couldn't escape it, but he could change who he was within the Curve. When he understood that, he opened the box of MemMax ampules. There were four left, each one ready to slip into the skinsting and apply, and when they were all gone he would be a king of the Curve. His brother had said so.

He took them into the reeking bathroom and broke each ampule into the commode, and flushed them away. Then he went back to the table and sat, hands folded, waiting to be Lázaro again.

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CURIOSITIES

THE 27TH DAY, BY JOHN MANTLEY (1956)

ONE OF THE most common — and hackneyed — stfnal concepts of the 1950s was our headlong descent into nuclear destruction, and the efforts of our Big Space Brothers to prevent it, either from altruistic motives or the purely selfish.

In John Mantley's only sf novel, five very different people are kidnapped by an alien race and each given capsules which they are told contain enough explosive power to destroy all life on Earth. There's a gimmick, though, one that actually places this book above most of the others, regardless of how many salt-grains it takes to swallow: in twenty-seven days, the capsules will be harmless — assuming that none of the five have used theirs before then. The capsules are keyed to the individuals so that if they die, the explosive is rendered inert.

Not a bad little conceit, all things considered, because it elevates what would otherwise be yet another dreary ideological cautionary tale to a character-driven story that actually has some power behind it. Each of the characters — American, British, German, Russian, and Chinese — cope with their responsibility as best they can; some tragically, some heroically.

One of the characters, a scientist, figures out something very important about the golden capsules and uses this knowledge to bring about exactly the outcome that the aliens wanted in the first place.

Perhaps that outcome is, in retrospect, a bit obvious, but Mantley does it as well as any and better than most. He wrote for film and TV, and *The 27th Day* is certainly cinematic enough. Filmed in 1957, the movie is even more blatantly anti-Communist than the book, which is saying something.

—Bud Webster

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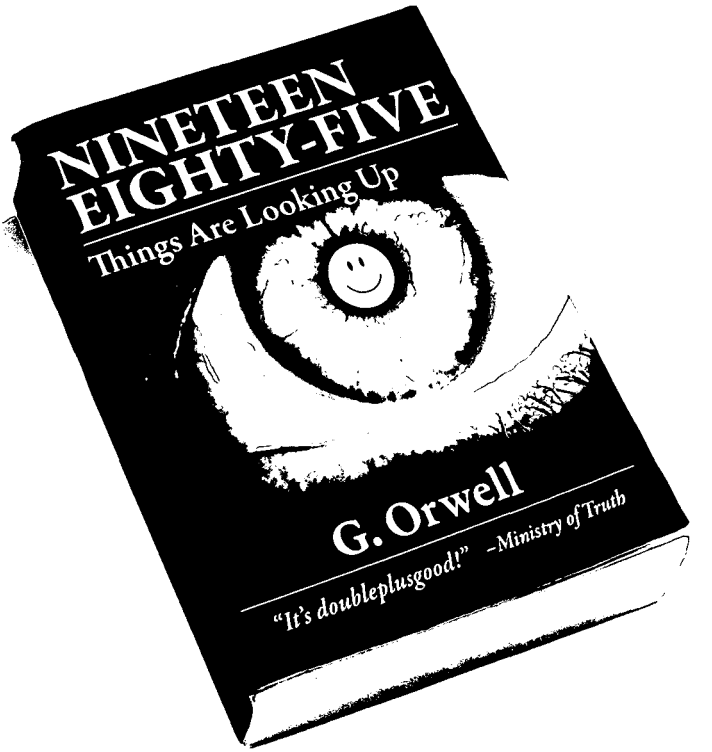

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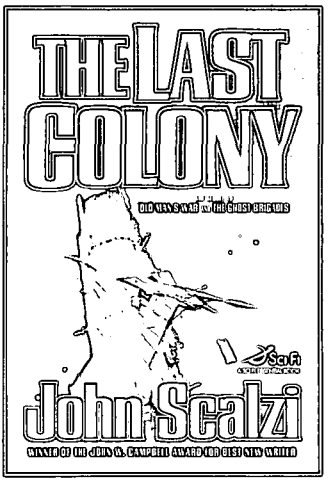

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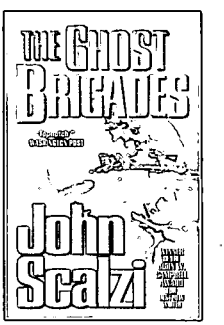

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